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DRAGON QUEST XI

CAN JAPAN'S FAVOURITE GAME FINALLY MAKE IT BIG IN THE WEST?

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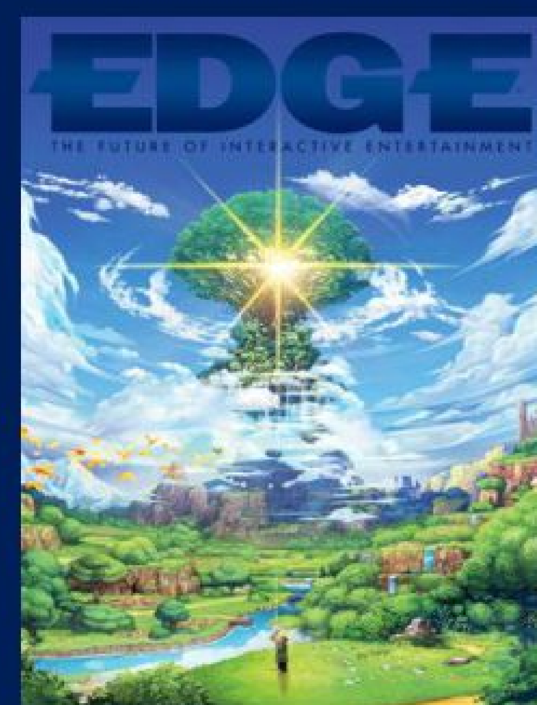
You ask for a contribution? We're all doing what we can

Reinvention is, as the word implies, never going to be easy. And it can come in myriad different forms. In this issue's Super Play feature, we examine the current state of emulation. It's been thrown into something of an existential crisis by the hardware-based Super Nt console, which upgrades the SNES for the 21st century in style – and at quite a price.

To lay eyes on a freshly unboxed Super Nt is to understand exactly where all your money has gone; it looks, feels and works like a dream, its maker's labour plain to see. But around the world, game companies are reinventing themselves constantly behind the scenes, often in invisible ways. This month we head to Montreal for the Ubisoft Developer Conference, and find a publisher of videogames that is making potentially world-changing innovations in artificial intelligence behind the scenes.

The theme of rebirth runs right through this issue, and it's by no means by design; it is simply a reflection of an industry that, while moving ever forward, is reaching a certain age. One where the past is as valued as the future. And one in which a mistake can be as important as success. Maybe it's the crew behind *Trailblazers*, helmed by a former Bizarre Creations dev returning to console games after a spell in the smartphone wilderness. Or *The Blackout Club*, made by a team of veteran developers belatedly returning to what they do best. We hope, at some point, Konami will learn something valuable from *Metal Gear Survive*.

Dragon Quest encapsulates all of this. It is gaming's purest expression of the battle between old and new: a series that has survived for three decades, and has had its ups and downs, but has always seemed to be hemmed in by its past. People love it for what it is, not what it might become; when they say they want a new *Dragon Quest*, they mean they want another old one. For years, this Japanese national treasure has struggled to win over western players. Beginning on p60, we find out how, with *Dragon Quest XI*, that might be about to change.



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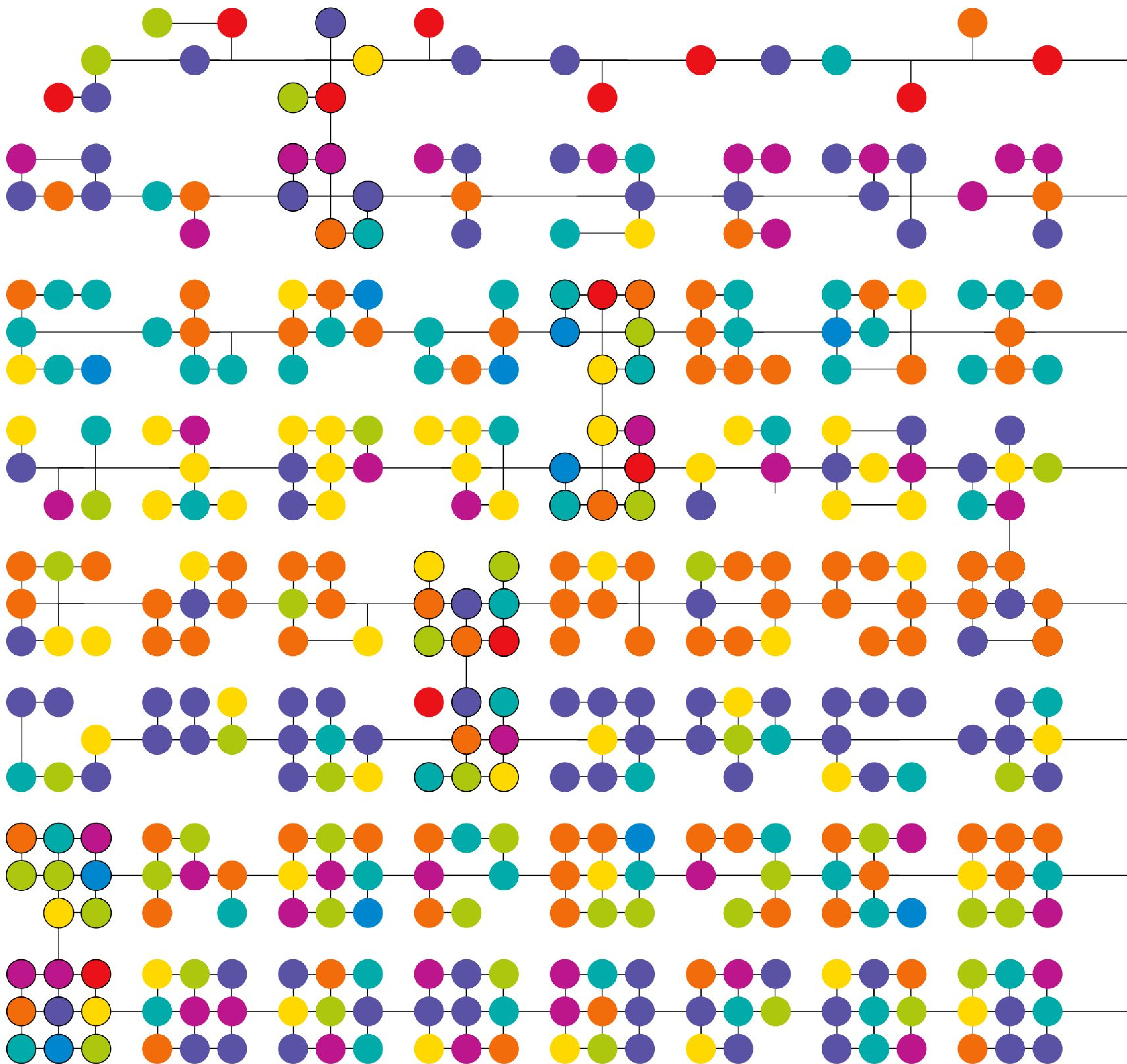
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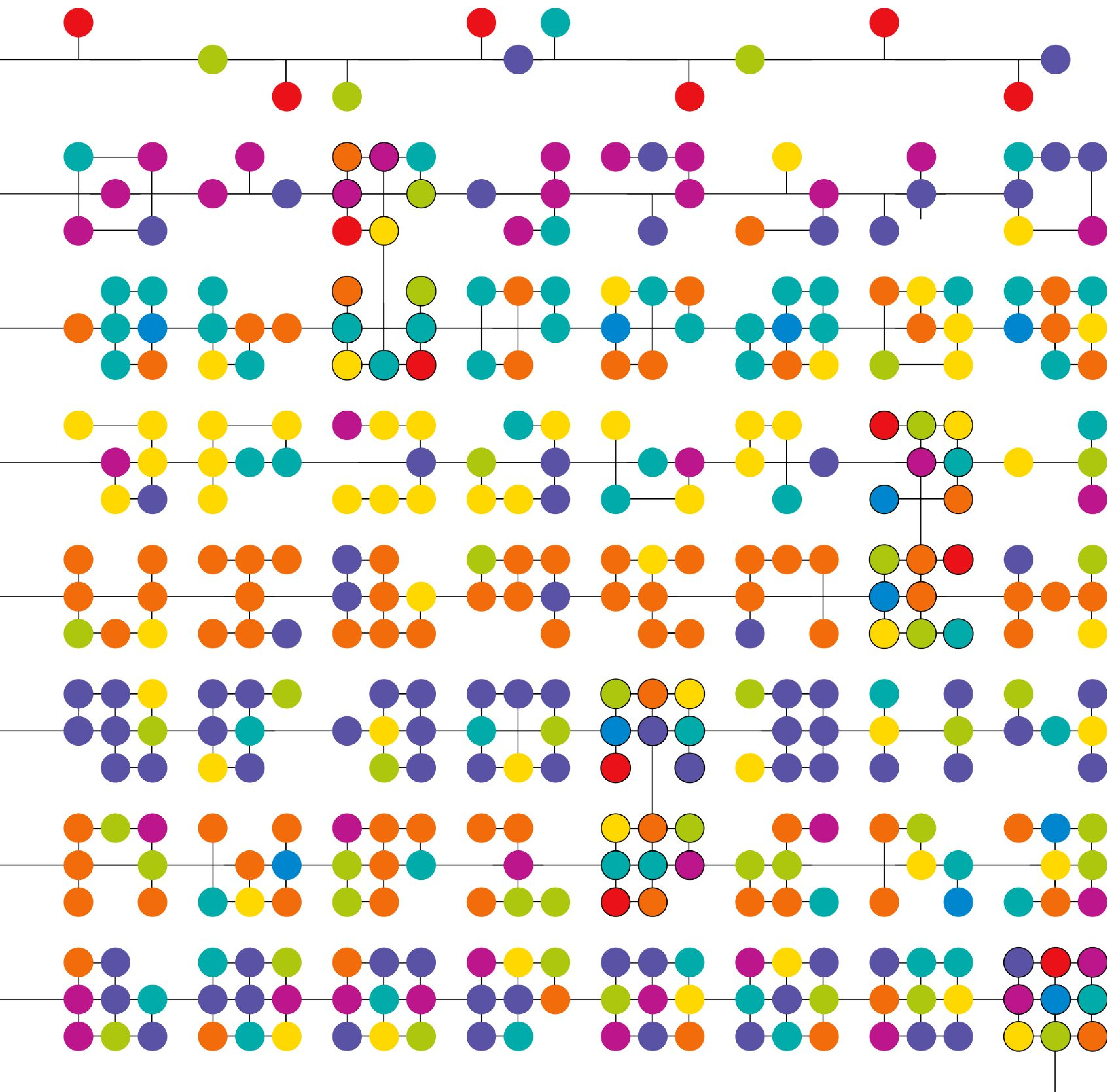
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Forge ahead

At Ubisoft, the greatest minds in AI dream of a future in which videogames are smart enough to solve real-world problems



Machine learning sees computer systems use big data to perform and improve certain tasks – without ever having been explicitly programmed to do so

There was a time, not so long ago, when it was fashionable to accuse Ubisoft of repeatedly making the same thing. In fairness, Ubi looked worryingly comfortable. Most of its games rarely deviated from a set formula: whether it was *Assassin's Creed*, *Far Cry*, *Watch Dogs* or *The Division*, everything seemed to blend into one analogous soup of one-button takedowns, X-ray vision, climbable towers and collectibles. They say that good design is invisible; Ubisoft's more significant achievements in videogame design over the past several years have, perhaps, gone under the radar.

Until now, that is. The annual Ubisoft Developers Conference brings together the company's various creative teams from all over the world to its Montreal studio for four days, an opportunity to share best practices and technological breakthroughs with each other in the hope of sparking new ideas. For the first time in eight years, the internal conference officially opened its doors to press this year (while **Edge** has previously attended UDC, a strict NDA has ensured the details of Ubisoft's inner workings have stayed under wraps). It was an invitation to sit in on dev-focused talks and roundtables, where Ubisoft's best and brightest happily discussed trade secrets and huge advancements.

A bold move, but one that makes sense in the Ubisoft narrative, reflecting the publisher's renewed focus on ▶

HUMAN AFTER ALL
As AI becomes more advanced, and Ubisoft's virtual worlds become ever-more realistic, games could help solve real physics-based problems. "In videogames, we tend to imitate what's been done in the real world with motion capture," Yves Jacquier says. "We think for the first time – it's not old, it's only been two years since we've seen these kinds of concepts emerging – it goes around both ways." Highly developed AI in games could provide a useful virtual testing ground for medical and engineering products before they're prototyped, such as testing the effectiveness of a prosthetic limb in various situations: when the user runs, goes downstairs, gets into a car or falls. "Or how would a car behave in this or that situation – with pedestrians involved, or with weather conditions?" Jacquier says. "These are tests you cannot do in real life. Some of them would be so expensive it wouldn't work, and some of them are just not legal, or even moral! But in a videogame environment, you can do that."

transparency and outward communication in the last few years. *Watch Dogs* and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* attracted ire from players. Ubisoft listened – but crucially, *showed* that it was listening. *Watch Dogs* returned for a sequel, minus the new-generation pressure and with a playful new attitude; *Assassin's Creed* took a very public year off to let Ubi take stock of the series, a well-received promise delivered upon with *Origins*. If there was a message, the message was undoubtedly: "We'll show you."

And if anyone continued to doubt that Ubisoft isn't out to change things, sitting in on UDC's in-depth lectures would easily quash them. In a hall filled with eager employees, the people behind *Assassin's Creed* quizzed those making *For Honor* and *Far Cry* about their latest advancements. Artificial intelligence was a topic discussed in detail at this year's UDC: to anyone looking closely at its recent games, Ubisoft's singular approach to AI is self-evident. It often goes beyond merely having enemies shoot guns or take cover, instead aiming to create realistic worlds with systems and AI that combine in interesting ways. Think, for example, how *Watch Dogs 2*'s San Franciscans are programmed to commit crime and call the cops on one another – or how *Origins*' guards need to take bathroom breaks, grab a bite to eat somewhere nearby or locate an unoccupied bed in the vicinity for a short kip.

UDC proved that Ubisoft's developers are out to build ecosystems that can function convincingly at all times, even when unseen. Their ideal worlds are the anti-Truman Show, essentially: the player is not the centre of it, although they can influence it, and the world must react appropriately when they do. Enter *Origins*' character-avoidance system, Pilot, and 3D volumetric solution, NavVolumes, which started to take shape behind the scenes of the original *Watch Dogs*. The navigation system ensures NPCs can realistically navigate both dynamic indoor and outdoor environments, and avoid colliding with the player and other characters in a subtler manner that better mimics real human behaviour. It was followed by explanations of the breakthrough that made this superior pathfinding performance a reality: a simple, smart method of filtering out certain voxels near walls to reduce the memory footprint of the 3D data.

A talk about *Far Cry 5*'s AI, meanwhile, showcased not just *how* NPCs behave, but *why*. Devs explained that they program the 'guns for hire' according to their own version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, with autonomy and convincing reactivity supporting systemic gameplay at the bottom of the pyramid, and contextual behaviours and purpose at the top. The idea is that the AI has a sense of self-preservation motivated by their individual agenda – grabbing a burger and a beer at the bar at the end of the day, or going fishing to bring home a catch for their family dinner – which makes their behaviour more believable. If they're wounded, they'll position themselves behind nearby cover and call for help; if an enemy sees their friends fall, their morale level will drop, and instead of acting as the player's punchbag, they'll do what any self-serving human would do: flee. It's clear that Ubisoft is making progress towards creating artificial intelligence that is more human, believable and self-sustaining than ever before. It doesn't come as a total surprise, then, when plenty of UDC discussions revolve around how the studio's machine-learning advancements are becoming developed enough to help build videogames themselves.

> It goes beyond having enemies shoot guns or take cover, instead aiming to create realistic worlds

A new type of self-learning AI in *For Honor*, for example, is helping identify bugs and balance new weapons. With the third-person fighting game containing 18 heroes and 153 unique matchups, automated testing will soon be able to lift a huge weight from the dev team's shoulders: reinforcement-learning algorithms have deep-learning AI bots train themselves en masse against each other, producing valuable data. While it's not yet perfected – deterministic behaviour tends to pop up, including the AI refusing to kill its opponent and instead repeatedly breaking its guard to game the algorithm for the most reward – it's close. The team even hopes to eventually include the DeepBots in-game: lifelike AI would mean opposition that could be tailored to players' individual playstyles, the ability to help balance an ever-changing meta and even sub in for online rage-quitters so adeptly that you may not even notice the switch.

A clutch of game releases later, and Ubisoft has realised that the more human AI becomes, the more applicable it is to real-world problems. To that end, it has founded La Forge – a small, whiteboard-covered prototyping space in the Montreal studio, home to some of the most advanced industry and academic minds and dedicated to bridging the gap between the two worlds. "The concept of La Forge emerged from trials and errors – it did not happen overnight," says **Yves Jacquier**, executive producer of Ubisoft's production-services studio and La Forge project head. "We used to work with universities, and created one of the first videogame AI chairs with Yoshua Bengio back in 2011. And what we learned was that we had many things we wanted to do together, but did not spend enough time focusing on how to be better at working on the same ground."

In the end, Jacquier knew he needed something as concrete as the in-house La Forge to make it work. It was a bet that he hoped would pay off. "You're telling the academic side, 'Come and work on-site in an industry', so it goes against the DNA of creating knowledge. And you're telling the industry, 'You will open all your doors to students and professors while they are in the building'. For a company like Ubisoft, that's ▶

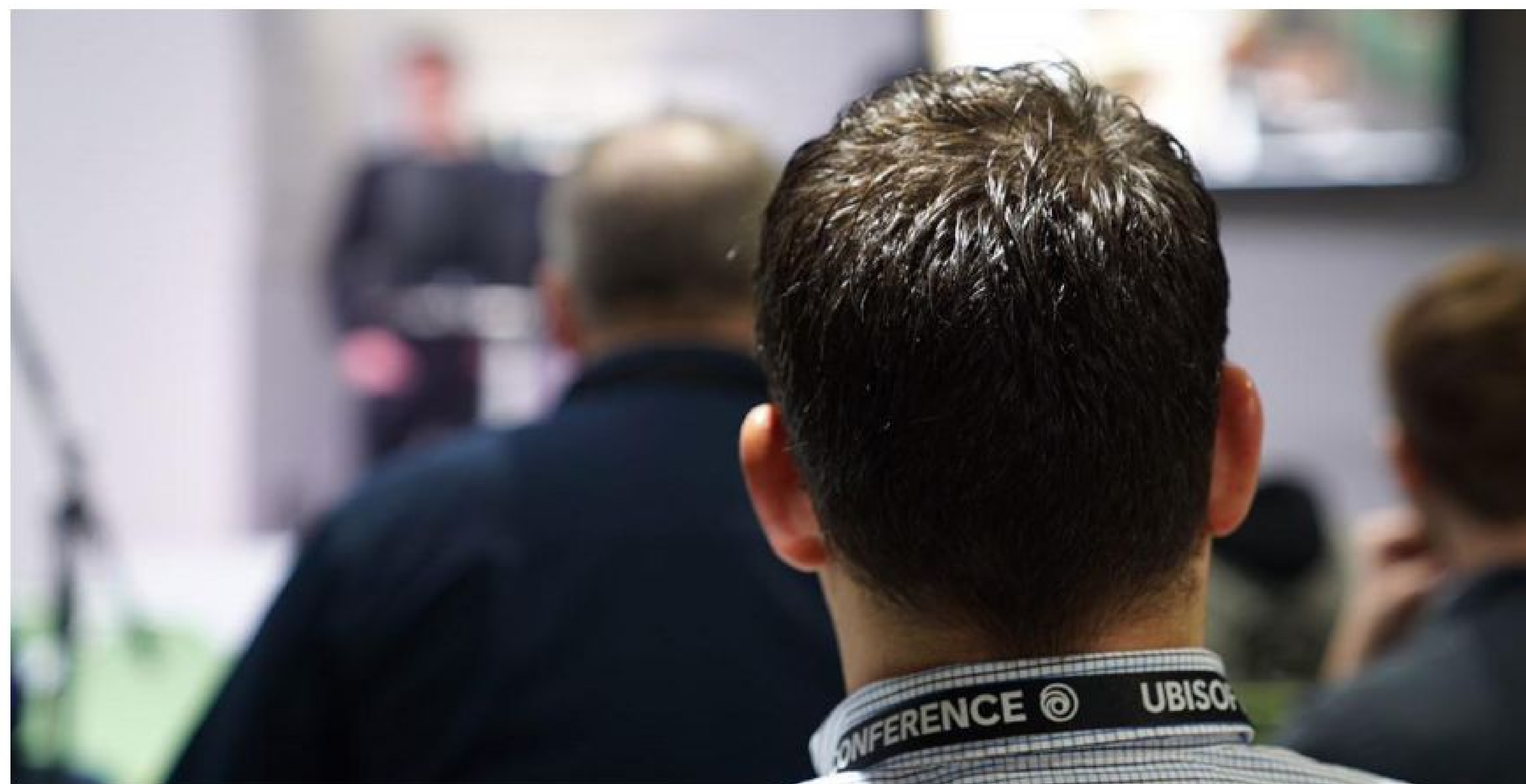
Yves Jacquier personifies La Forge's academia/industry combination: he has a PhD in particle physics, and was part of the team that discovered the Higgs boson

ELECTRIC SWEEP
One UDC talk, given by Daniel Holden, animation researcher at La Forge, covered the benefits of using neural networks to help clean up motion-capture data in games. Train a neural network to learn how to map markers to points on an animation model, and you can effectively skip the laborious part of the process – fixing data problems caused by erroneous, corrupt or obscured markers – and go straight to the solving stage. This 'robust solving' solution compares the mo-capped model to a second, more accurate AI skeleton that's learned correct movement through a huge amount of data. Then, it computes the differences and updates the skeletons to eliminate the errors, creating a result very similar to a hand-cleaned product. While there are limitations in the amount of training motion data currently available, and there's still a little way to go before the software will be able to be used on Ubisoft's games, Holden and co are making swift progress towards saving countless hours of developers' valuable time.

dealing with some sort of secrecy in terms of brands and gaming, it's a hard sell." Jacquier laughs as he recalls his boss' reaction to the pitch: "He told me in French, 'C'est gonflé'. It's ballsy!"

But the benefits for various aspects of the studio outweighed the costs, Jacquier argued. "When you have senior people making multiple games, maybe they want time to test a new idea. So that was a way to say, 'Even if it doesn't totally work as an acceleration innovator, maybe it can help retention, to attract people and also have a corporate impact. The more we support the university, the more people we can hire, and the more people can stay here in Montreal instead of going to the US. It's good for the whole ecosystem." Curious creators from among Ubisoft's employees participate in three-month projects with post-grad students and scholars, bridging the gap between the academic world and the videogame industry to try to spark ideas that could have real-world applications. Imagine, for instance, AI so advanced it could create games in much the same way that a real human developer might.

The reality is closer than you might think. McGill University associate professor **Derek Nowrouzezahrai** demonstrates, during a remarkable UDC session, the ways in which machine learning can be used to generate realistic interactive graphics under massive time, and financial, constraints. "[At La Forge] we can leverage not only Ubisoft's strengths in domain knowledge, and expertise in the people we have around us, but also their ability and decades of experience generating this realistic simulation data," he explains. With years and years of data available on lighting effects, animations and physics, La Forge's talented academics can teach AI to synthesise realistic behaviour without having to force their way through actual physics. Lighting that responds to changes in scenery can be auto-generated; a highly accurate representation of a human figure walking across uneven terrain is produced with algorithms instead of via the lengthy and expensive process of motion capture.



AI was one of two hot topics at this years GDC. The second, unsurprisingly, was live games – although discussions of how to reduce team fatigue led back to machine learning and automated dev processes

While the results aren't up to Ubisoft's usual big-budget, human-authored standards just yet, the studio is already making use of La Forge's latest breakthrough. Commit Assistant, Jacquier says, is the "Minority Report of programming": an AI software that can predict where bugs in developer's code will appear before they even become a problem. Using the latest machine learning and big-data techniques, Commit Assistant combs through massive code repositories, analysing all past bugs and regressions and assigning a unique signature to each. When a dev submits new code, it'll focus in on any matching signatures and warn of a possible bug.

> "The concept of La Forge emerged from trials and errors – it did not happen overnight"

It can also apply reinforced learning techniques to determine the most likely cause of the issue, and offer a fix. While it's not perfect just yet – the success rate is about 60 per cent – the more bug signatures Commit Assistant learns, the more accurate it will become. It'll never force changes, however: for coders, it's what spell checker is to writers. "It remains your decision," Jacquier says. "It can accelerate some parts of your job, like reviewing, and directly focus on the things that might need your attention. It leaves you more time to write on different topics that you really care about."

The idea is not simply to replace gamedevs with algorithms, but to free up their time – around 20 per cent of it, Jacquier estimates – for less tedious parts of the job. "Different production teams will decide what to do with this extra time," Jacquier says. "Do they want to add more depth to the gameplay? Do they want to add extra features? I don't know. They will have to answer this question."

There's a recurring theme to most UDC talks: devs extol the virtues of automated processes in helping prevent burnout. The robots, Ubisoft says, aren't out to destroy us and take our jobs: in an age where teams are under more pressure than ever to keep creating new content for their games, responsible corporate applications of AI could be a humanitarian solution. "We're trying to empower developers to spend less time on the boring parts of the job, and let them decide what has real added value.

"I think they are going to surprise us. We *want* them to surprise us. Everything that we're doing in terms of AI as tools to facilitate work is really made to provide our creators with more time to surprise us, instead of having to work on repetitive tasks." If all goes to plan, we expect to see far fewer towers from Ubisoft in the future. ■

Some 31 studios visited Montreal for UDC. Each floor is decked out to represent a different aspect of the city







Developer talks demonstrated the company-wide applications of other teams' breakthroughs. Self-driving AI in *Watch Dogs 2* that can learn to adapt to different road and weather conditions, for instance, could be used in other racing series such as *The Crew* – and even in *Assassin's Creed* for self-steering horses

Public play

Inside the London Games Festival's Now Play This, a showcase for experimental and accessible games

Holly Gramazio is the director of Now Play This, a festival of experimental game design, which exhibits both physical and digital games, playable on screens, as room-sized installations, and even outdoors. Beginning as a prototype festival in September 2015, it officially launched the following year as part of the inaugural London Games Festival. It continues this year at Somerset House, from April 6 to 8; for tickets, visit nowplaythis.net.

How did you get your start in game design, and what led you to setting up Now Play This?
About ten years ago I moved to London from Adelaide in Australia. I was only going to stay for six months or so, but I ended up playing this enormous chase game across the city. It was just really extraordinary and changed how I felt about London. I thought, 'That was good – maybe I should try designing games.' I started making physical games and curating a playtesting event for an arts company called Hide&Seek, where people who were interested in physical games could come along and try out new ideas. Nowadays I'm half of a tiny company called Matheson Marcault with my colleague Sophie Sampson, who's also a producer of Now Play This.

Now Play This is supported by London Games Festival. As an historically business-focused event, this feels like quite a left turn for the organisers. What's in it for them, do you think?
I definitely think they're interested in the experimental work being done in games, but also making it accessible for a very general audience. We tend to get a lot of people who haven't necessarily been to a game event before coming along, but we also get people who make the sort of experimental work that we like to show, so we have these two threads of audience going on. London Games Festival is definitely interested in reaching an audience outside of those already interested in game events.

> "We tend to get a lot of people who haven't necessarily been to a game event before coming along"

How do you decide what fits the bill when putting together the line-up?
It's not quite a typical show where you're queuing to play a short demo for an upcoming release. We try to make sure we have a good mix. It's partly about having this art-gallery structure. We definitely don't have games where you would sit down to play for three hours then go away thinking, 'Wow, there's sure a lot of content in that game, I'm going to get it and play the other 90 hours at home'. It does mean it can be challenging to show longer, deeper work, and we've struggled with finding the sort of space where someone can play something for an hour and not feel hurried. With commissions, we approach a lot of people directly. We also do an open call where we post what our themes are and say, 'If you've got a game you think might fit this, send it in and let us know about it.'

You say the festival aims to draw in a 'casual' general audience. That makes sense, since that type of crowd will appreciate the work without prejudice. What does the festival offer to the more traditional gaming audience?
When you look at the niche end of games, it can seem overwhelming – there's so much stuff and there's less critical writing about it. We try to select a wide range to sort of slice through this and pull particular themes together, this year's themes being place, pattern and game-making. I think anyone who's interested in the wider possibility of games should get something out of it regardless of their level of experience. In the case of games that are available for free online, why should you come play them here? Well, partly because of the context – hopefully, the layout and choices of games will help you to make connections between the different work you might not have if you encountered it in isolation – but also partly because we've thought about how to best show them. We have a physical set-up and custom controllers that make it different from how it would be to play at home.


Holly Gramazio, festival director



You've described the festival as 'digitally agnostic' in terms of what it exhibits. What does that mean for how the event is put together?
We are interested in the interaction and the experience, and whether it makes sense as part of the overall exhibition. It doesn't really matter whether that's a digital thing or a physical installation, it doesn't matter whether these are people who might not normally consider themselves as game designers – they might be product designers, visual artists, sculptors or composers – but we may see games and play informing their work. Our core interest is in people who are using play in game design in interesting, communicative ways. ■

Last year's show played host to a special installation version of smartphone puzzle game *Kami 2*





ABOVE **Yara El-Sherbini, who made Operation Brexit, will show a piece on Israel-Palestine tension this year.** RIGHT **While there will be plenty of games playable with a pad, some works are entirely physical. Joy Is Here is a room-scale word search**





Appearing at this year's festival, Dobotone is a five-player multiplayer console where the fifth player takes the role of Game Remixer. The chosen one can fiddle with switches to change the rules of the game in chaotic realtime

IN-ART PURCHASE

When an experimental game event becomes a shop window



While the festival is more akin to an art gallery than a game convention, commercial releases still have a presence. Last year featured David O'Reilly's *Everything*, while writer Nate Crowley's exhibit of his 1,000 imaginary Twitter games later became the more consumable book 100 Best Videogames (That Never Existed). Gramazio isn't against the idea – whether a work becomes commercially viable or uploaded for free on itch.io, she says, "We hope the work we commission has a life beyond the festival."

Back to life

How Darewise is bringing a sci-fi MMO by Viktor Antonov and Randy Smith to fruition

For such a young company, Paris studio Darewise has already weathered a great deal of change. Founded only three years ago by two former Ubisoft producers, it set out as a publisher of mid-tier games – but after a rocky first game launch and finding itself facing yet another tectonic shift in the game industry, it's gone all-out into in-house development. Its first game, Project C, is an MMO with production values worthy of a creative team led by Randy Smith, director of *Thief: Deadly Shadows* and founder of *Spider: The Secret Of Bryce Manor* developer Tiger Style (and previously an **Edge** columnist), and Viktor Antonov, visual designer behind *Half-Life 2* and *Dishonored*. And it's powered by Improbable's future-facing multiplayer technology, SpatialOS, which promises to give all its players a single large, deeply simulated and persistent sci-fi world to play within. In other words, Darewise is making one hell of a pivot.

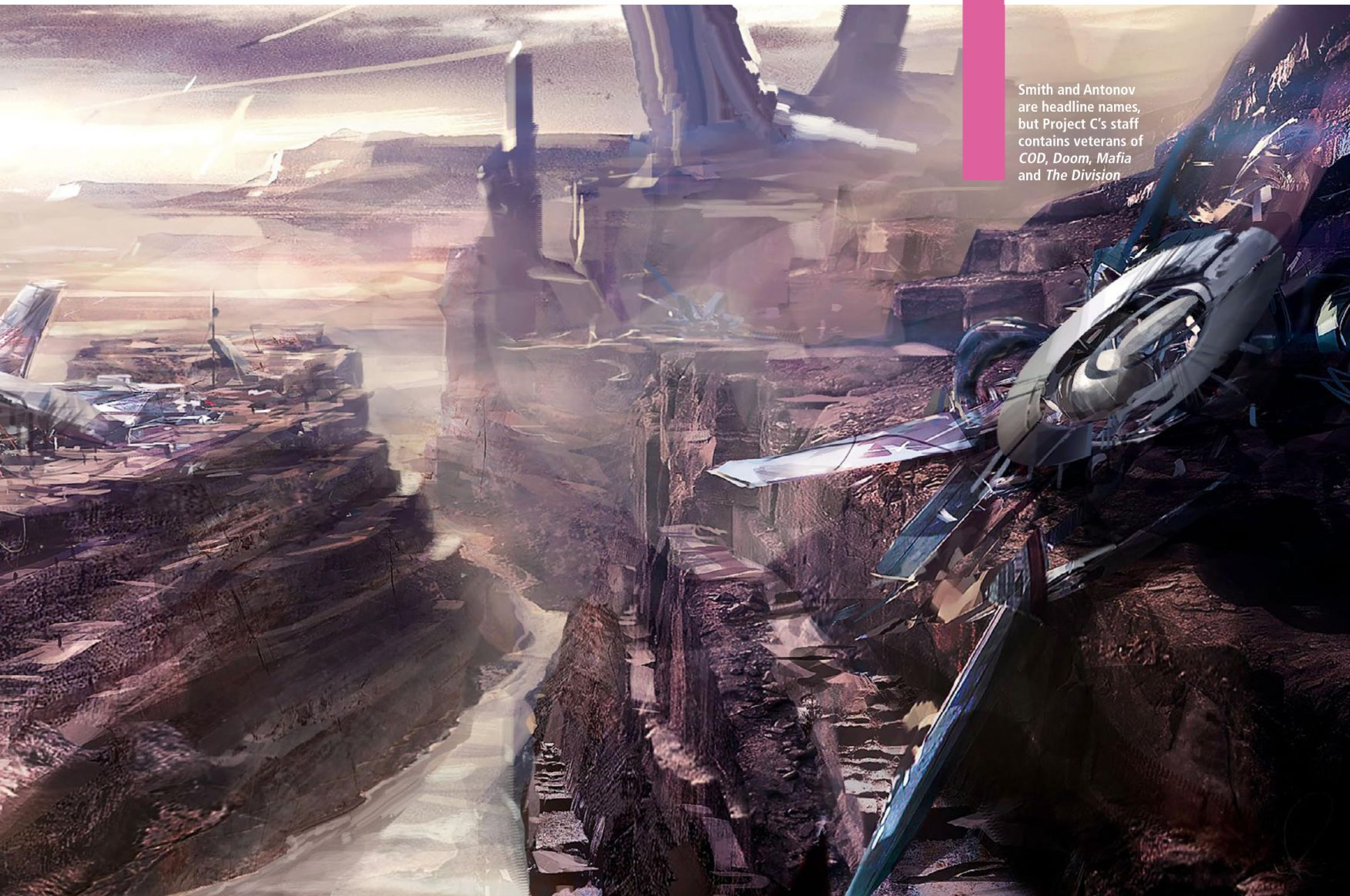
Back in 2015, though, its founders, **Benjamin Charbit** and **Vincent Marty**, were riding on a principle that seemed cast-iron. Sandbox multiplayer successes such as *Rust* and *Ark: Survival Evolved* seemed to be paving the way to a new model for business, and Marty and Charbit figured they could use the expertise they'd learned in helping to run Ubisoft's free-to-play and multiplayer divisions by producing their own. "The original vision we had for Darewise of being this publisher, this executive production house, came at a moment in the market," says Marty. "The self-publishing scene was booming, Early Access was booming; at the time it was a true development strategy. That changed pretty drastically over *Rokh*'s development." They signed Montreal-based Nvizzio Creations to make *Rokh*, a sandbox survival game about establishing a base on Mars, but on its Early Access launch last May it was roundly criticised. "It's a sensitive topic for us," says Charbit. "The problem when you operate a game like we did is that you lose so much control over it. We lost a lot of control on that project."





Benjamin Charbit (top) and Vincent Marty

***Rokh* continues to** be improved and updated, but hasn't amassed much of a player base. Its specific issues aside, though, greater industry changes have made Charbit and Marty shift their approach – changes which make them believe that a middle-tier approach to game development is too risky today to be viable. "You cannot push to the quality



Smith and Antonov are headline names, but Project C's staff contains veterans of *COD*, *Doom*, *Mafia* and *The Division*

of triple-A games, and you cannot spend the level of resources of an indie, who can be very nimble, and be super creative," says Charbit. "In terms of risk and reward, we were in the worst-case scenario with *Rokh*." With Darewise's reinvention, they've chosen to go big, looking towards Bungie and Ubisoft's Massive Entertainment, but also to Pixar, particularly its maxim of never compromising on quality. "The only way to really do that," says Charbit, "is to basically have an unlimited budget. Thank god we raised a lot of money in the past."

Currently 20 staff strong, and aiming to scale up to 30 by the summer, Darewise is aggressively hiring, and not just locally. Hence Randy Smith, who brings with him a progressive and systems-led attitude to game design. Despite his more recent history with indie-scale projects at Tiger Style, Project C's codename purposely evokes LMNO, Smith's cancelled project for EA, a collaboration with Steven Spielberg. Project C is not at all the same kind of game – LMNO was a firstperson action-adventure, while Project C is a thirdperson action-MMO – but it has much of its ambition.

"The problem when you operate a game like we did is that you lose so much control over it"

For now, Darewise isn't talking specifics, but in thematic terms a close relative is Smith's own *Waking Mars*, Tiger Style's 2D game about exploring complex systems of caves filled with alien flora. Being entirely systems-led, each cave presents the player with an ecosystem to understand, play with and exploit, and that's precisely what Project C is aiming to do in a shared MMO world. "We want to bring players a new type of experience, of emergent gameplay, which can only come through systems – and this is where Randy's vision is tremendously helpful," Marty says. They envisage players being able to sit in their vehicle and watch the planet change around them, and for the interactions between its native life to present them with opportunities for play and advantage, even as the MMO side of the game is about one player faction being pitted in a grand war against the other.

With Antonov's skill at making believable videogame worlds, at once monumental and rich with visual narration, the PvP war might not be as important as the planet itself. In fact, Charbit reveals that there is a system in the game which introduces a creature which will destroy the entire planet if all players don't band together to deal with it. The scale that these kinds of ideas demand is down to Improbable's SpatialOS, which will fully simulate the world on the network at all times, whether players are there to see things happening or not. That's an intoxicating promise, and it will lead the team into countless challenges. Charbit and Marty are entirely aware of what lies ahead, but argue that a systemic approach sidesteps the old problem of having to laboriously author content – the quests and events – which comprised *World Of Warcraft*'s generation. "With new tools and with players contributing with the content itself, it's game-changing," says Charbit. ■

NETWORK EFFECT

Charbit and Marty see Improbable's SpatialOS as the first revolution in games since they jumped online. It casts aside the old limitations of client-host or peer-to-peer connections in favour of players connecting to SpatialOS's architecture of many distributed servers, and it allows large-scale shared and persistent simulated worlds. "We're going to have a massive world that's fully simulated," says Charbit. "I used to work on *Assassin's Creed* and its pillar was 'a living breathing world', where you're in Paris and you see the NPCs performing actions around you, but they're triggered by you being close and they're not fully simulated. In Project C we have a world where we can place webcams in it and see it living, actions being performed without being triggered by players."

NORSE CODE

How ripples of detail in new studio Plausible Concept's miniature strategy game create a tsunami-sized challenge

Of all the words to describe Vikings, 'tiny' and 'charming' are usually least applicable. But realtime tactics game *Bad North* has you defend small, isometric pastel islands from waves of miniature Norse marauders. "The Viking invaders embody the chaotic spirit of the ocean," lead artist **Oskar Ståhlberg** says. "Like an inevitable tidal wave they emerge from the fog, disembark on the beaches and flood the island. Both the pathfinding and the combat simulation are spin-offs of fluid dynamics, so defending the island feels a lot like strategically placing levees to stave off a flood."

Every pint-sized isle is procedurally generated. "I came across an interesting procedural algorithm, somewhat pretentiously named Wave Function Collapse," Ståhlberg says. "The original algorithm worked with pixels, but I built my implementation around modular 3D tilesets. Having created several procedural art demos before, I felt the time was ripe to take this one to a new level." Various ridges, ramps and choke points affect how you protect your island's huts: the detritus of war can soon turn the Ghibli-esque locales from charming to curiously grisly.

"I've always been intrigued by small worlds," Ståhlberg says. "Much of my art revolves around it. *Bad North* is no different. Each island is a small idyllic home in a harsh, unforgiving sea. Everything that matters is on that island; should you fail to defend it, there is nowhere to run."

Prepare to stand your ground this summer when *Bad North* invades iOS and Switch, before sailing onto PC, PS4, Xbox One and Android. ■





The minimal design keeps the action readable. Ståhlberg wanted "a good-looking art style that is fast to produce for a small team, but that isn't low poly or pixel art. I don't want to justify my art with nostalgia"

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"A lot of bad things are happening to young kids and young minds… I'm hearing more and more people say the level of **violence in videogames** is really shaping young people's thoughts."

So is the level of unthinking lunacy coming out of Washington, **Donald Trump**, so let's not point fingers



"I play games… **I've not experienced any mass murdering inclinations**. You don't become a mass murderer because of a videogame. Let's stop passing the buck."

NRA rent-a-gob **Dana Loesch**, speaking in 2013, proves an unlikely ally in the war on idiocy



"I have been honoured to serve as CEO of the company I founded with my brothers almost 20 years ago and have seen the team **accomplish breakthrough things** in that time."

Indeed, outgoing Crytek boss **Cevat Yerli**. We'll never forget *Homefront: Revolution*, or all those staff that went unpaid for months on end

"**Morale was at a low.** We kept missing big trends. Infighting and fiefdoms were so famous, people made fun of it. It would have been funny if it hadn't been so true."



Quite right, Xbox head **Phil Spencer**. We hear Steve Ballmer wants that final line etched into his tombstone

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Hardware EXA Conversion Kit
Manufacturer Exa-Arcadia

In an era where costly, and space-hungry, bespoke cabinets are the rule, rather than the exception, Exa-Arcadia's conversion kit must sound like manna from heaven to arcade owners. The Japanese startup's new initiative is based on Windows, but works like a Neo-Geo MVS, supporting up to four games at once in a single cabinet, the line-up able to be changed by swapping PCBs in and out.

Yes, it's very old-school – games will only be available in physical PCB form, with no plans for digital distribution – but the company, founded by veterans of Japan's arcade industry, has some very modern plans, and is smartly straddling the old and new. The kit supports both 4:3 CRT and modern 16:9 cabinets, for instance, and Exa-Arcadia promises specs that surpass contemporary home-console hardware.

For the moment, Exa-Arcadia is focusing its attentions on indie developers, calling for pitches from small studios who think they have an arcade-friendly game on their hands. Ports are acceptable, with the stipulation that coin-op-exclusive features are added during the conversion process. Those on board (apologies) early on include G.Rev, developer of *Senko No Ronde* and *Border Down*, and Seibu Kaihatsu, the original creator of *Raiden*.

That all may imply a Japanese focus, but Exa-Arcadia is planning to roll the system out around the world; indeed, it's already on location test in the US, and the company is planning stops on the event circuit too, including the Stunfest fighting-game tournament in France. True innovation is rare in the arcade these days; sometimes, the best way of moving forward is to take a step or two back.

My Favourite Game
Thomas Mars

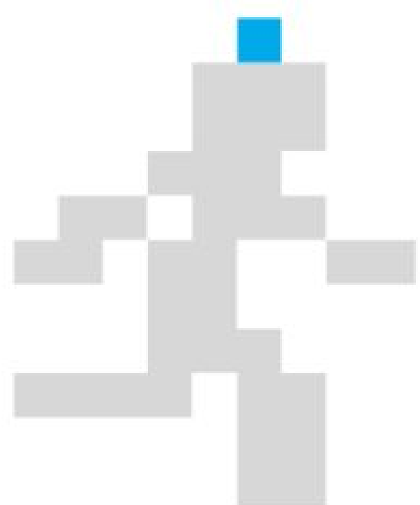
The Phoenix frontman on performing at The Game Awards, social gaming and creativity within limitations

Thomas Mars is the lead singer of French dance-pop band Phoenix, best known for their Grammy Award-winning album Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix. We had the opportunity to speak to Mars during the band's break from touring their sixth studio album, Ti Amo, and just had to start by asking him about their recent appearance on Geoff Keighley's stage.

Seeing you at The Game Awards was a real surprise. Were the *Mario* and Sega references hard to implement?
Yeah, the Sega logo saying 'Phoenix', I wanted that because when I met Chris in the band, one of the first things he did was bring *Sonic* to my place. The first year we met we were either making music or we were playing *Sonic*. Then we expanded the idea to getting these Nintendo sounds and adding these textures in the song like an 8bit game. It was a fun little thing to do. Branco [Laurent Brancowitz, Phoenix's guitarist] spent a lot of time putting those sounds in. I also tried to harmonise the same way they say 'Say-Gah!' which is really hard, but in the end we decided, 'Let's not waste any more time on this'. (laughs)

What's your earliest gaming memory?
It was with my older brother, who's nine years older than me. I would watch him play *Wizardry* on the Apple IIe. This was in 1980, so I was four. This game had no pictures, just a green screen and text – it was purely working with your imagination. I remember playing this in the daytime with him and being scared because it was so intense! That was great bonding with my brother, you know. It was more than a game; it was a great experience, too.

PHOENIX NIGHTS
Growing up in Versailles, France, Mars and his school friends got together to form Phoenix in the 1990s. The band had associations with other breakthrough French artists including Daft Punk (prior to becoming robots they played with guitarist Laurent Brancowitz in a band called Darlin'), while they were the backing band for label mates Air during the latter's UK TV appearances. Under a nom de plume, Mars also sang on Air's soundtrack for The Virgin Suicides, the debut film of writer-director – and his future wife – Sofia Coppola. The band have also composed scores for Coppola's later films, including The Beguiled. You can find out more about Phoenix's music and upcoming tour dates at wearephoenix.com.



What kind of games are you drawn to?
I never had an interest in being on my own in front of a computer. The band and myself have always been interested in multiplayer. I think of the similarity between where games and music are these days. It's very lonely. You are together, but not in the same room. When you make music you just need one computer and you can have all the instruments you want, and you just send files to a producer, to a mastering. The idea of a band is dying, which is sad because it's way more satisfying an experience. I guess with videogames it's the same: you're connected, but you're not really. The idea that you're playing with your best friend online, I don't think anyone does that, they play online with other people from other countries.

> "The band and myself have always been interested in multiplayer"

Nintendo's always been good with local multiplayer, even now with the Switch.
They seem to care the most about the impact on your life, which is nice. They also made the first console to have four controller ports – always our favourite.

Do you have any affinity for French games?
I had a few weird games when I was really young but you could tell they were just for the French market – the gameplay was really bad. But I remember one on Atari ST called *Night Hunter* – it was a vampire game. It's the first time a game used real music, Bela Lugosi's Dead By Bauhaus, but it's really distorted, it has a great crushed quality to it. It's one of the most memorable game scores for me.

Many musicians are into old game scores. Despite advances in technology, these days we're seeing people also gravitate back to chiptune and MIDI. Why do you think that is?
For me, music in videogames is interesting when there are restrictions. In the beginning it was all about limitations – how do you make music that's interesting and just like 50K (laughs) or something ridiculously small, so you have to come up with ideas. I think a lot of musicians love these restrictions. When we do a score for a movie we're looking for restrictions. You're looking for a director to say, 'you can only do this', or 'I want the score played only on synth', that's what creates something interesting and gives it an identity.

Do you have a favourite game?
It's like Citizen Kane and his Rosebud – the original. For me, that would be *Lode Runner* on Macintosh. That was the one I played the most as a kid. It was one of the first games where you could create your own levels. It was so fun to create, play them and see if they work. The pleasure of seeing other people play on it was one of my favourite things. ■



On the road, the band plays *FIFA*, Mars says. "It feels like the game we played as kids, but it's exciting because it keeps improving"

WEB GAME

David Lynch Teaches Typing
bit.ly/lynchtyping

Yes, Twin Peaks is great – but where are the *practical* applications? Enter David Lynch Teaches Typing, a free game from Rhino Stew that splices the surrealist genius of the filmmaker into a game that imparts the basics of touch typing. Okay, so it's not exactly Mavis Beacon: narrated by "Lynch" himself, the experience starts by explaining your keyboard's 'home row' before taking several sharp left turns involving crying babies, undulating bugs and an entirely unmerited smoke break. It's equal parts funny and unsettling, and over all too soon. Given its parodic tone, the mention of a full version is probably a hoax – but if we do indeed have to "sit in a bathtub and make smacking noises with our hands" to summon it forth, then so be it, we suppose.





VIDEO

Papers, Please – The Short Film
bit.ly/papersfilm

Based on Lucas Pope's award-winning indie game, in which you play an immigration officer at the border of the fictional Arstotzka, this ten-minute film adaptation of *Papers, Please* explores the human cost of living under totalitarian rule. Camera shots flick, like searching eyes, over information on passports and permits; a photo suggests the family waiting at home; a rare moment of sympathy has consequences. It may not be as effective as stamping the documents yourself, but it's excellently done – and subtitled in 22 languages, no less.

COMIC

Bloodborne: The Death Of Sleep
bit.ly/bloodcomic

A better title might have been The Death Of Subtlety. The details of Hidetaka Miyazaki's cosmic horror, so delicately secreted throughout Yharnam in the game, are quickly laid bare in writer (and *Bloodborne* fan) Ales Kot's comic. In fairness, when you're dealing with source material of this kind, an original spin is a requirement. The portrayal of repeated deaths as supernatural mystery is imaginative, and some may find its willingness to instantly divulge key plot points intriguing, especially alongside Piotr Kowalski's glorious artwork. Seasoned Hunters, however, will cry sacrilege: this is a world apart from Miyazaki's storytelling, as evidenced by a bafflingly literal manifestation of the mythical paleblood and – the horror! – a talking protagonist.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

HEADSET

Steelseries Arctis Pro + GameDAC
bit.ly/arctisdac

Headsets are a tricky business. Once you've got one, you don't need another, so manufacturers must come up with steadily crazier offerings to both make themselves stand out and have you contemplating whether it's time to upgrade. Steelseries was last on these pages with its Arctis Pro Bluetooth, whose USP was a dual-audio system that let you, say, play a game while voice chatting on Discord. Just months later, the Arctis Pro + GameDAC is the world's first certified Hi-Res Audio gaming headset, which means full, uncompressed audio at up to 40,000Hz, almost double that of standard sets. There's a compromise – it requires a wired connection – but for gaming audiophiles, this is the best headset on the market.



continue

Prime mover
Twitch gives Prime members free PC games

Beast seller
Monster Hunter: World becomes Capcom's biggest-selling game ever

Indie money
GameMaker titles can now be exported to Switch; indie devs everywhere salivate

Sweet Souls brother
Prepare to fight us in the queue for the new Knight Solaire amiibo

quit

Trigger unhappy
RPG *Chrono Trigger* gets a PC port – and it's dire

Royale flush
In the wake of *Fortnite* domination, we can't help but feel for *PUBG*

Enough grope
From the man even Piers Morgan called a dick, it's tasteless dating sim Super Seducer

In the flesh
An iam8bit x RealDoll *Inside* mystery collector's edition? God have mercy

TWEETS

Happy "Maybe think about why you are @-ing women into collections of women on Twitter and whether it's helpful" Day
Philippa Warr @philippawarr
Deputy editor, PC Gamer

Crash should be embarrassed to show his face on the same platform as *Odyssey*. Amateur hour.
Matthew Castle @mrbasil_pesto
Editor in chief, Xbox On

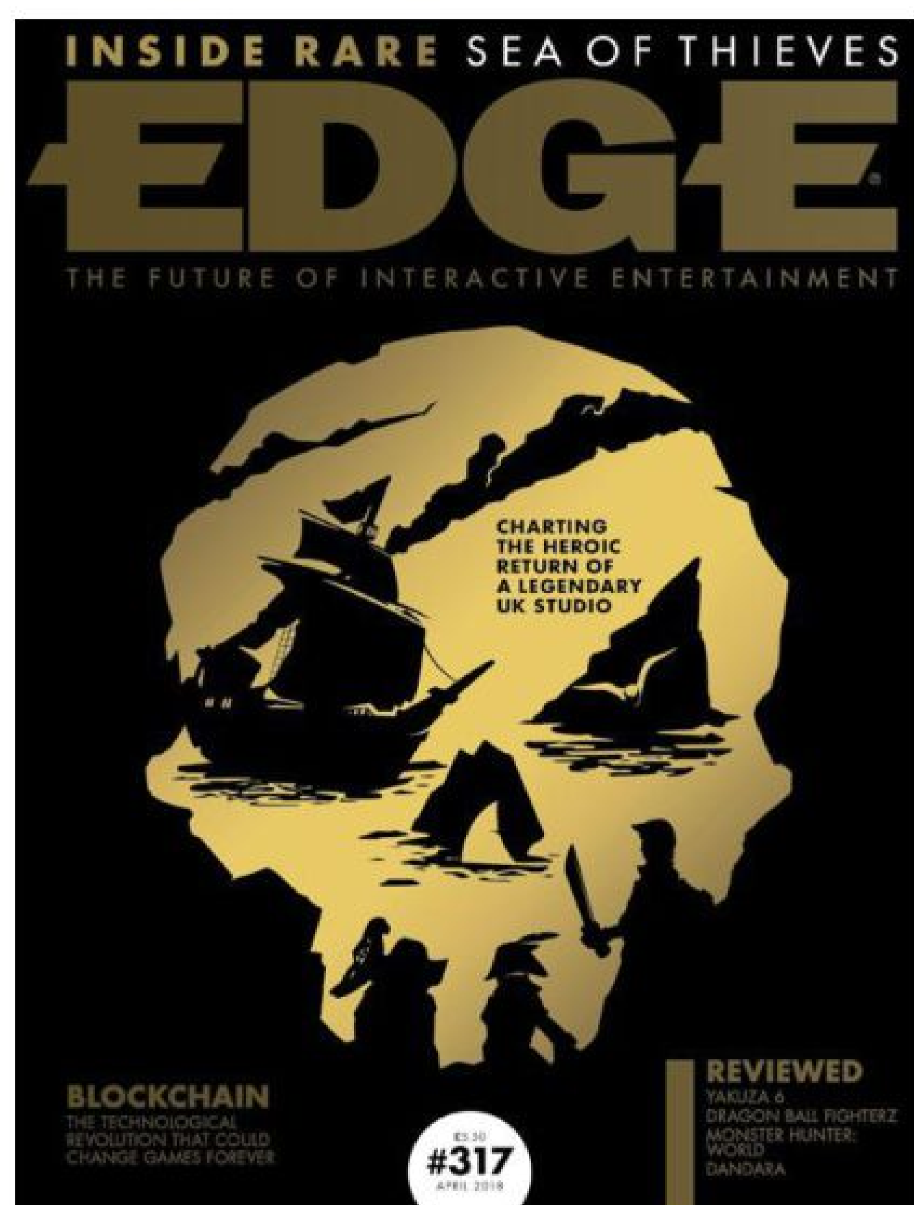
Twitter was a terrible mistake, wasn't it. Let's not do this bit any more
Nathan Brown @nathan_brown
Editor, **Edge**



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DISPATCHES MAY



Issue 317

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation.Plus

Off switch

I own a Switch. I was sold from day one. Even if they had a Wii U-style misfire again, I would've enjoyed my time with the Switch. I'm happy with its success and I'm glad this console is getting more games with much more enthusiasm for the platform than Nintendo's ever had with past consoles. That said, even with all its success: I don't want everything coming to the platform. Neither Nintendo consoles nor the player base are properly served with highly compromised ports. Saturating the platform with two-year-old games and flooding the eShop with tons of indies: it becomes a problem that the Wii ran into where the quantity drowns the quality.

And as someone who's used Nintendo consoles as the main console in the house, I want to see thirdparty developers making games with the same care and craft as Nintendo does. This would mean actually understanding the console's limits and designing around it without completely compromising their own content just to see it run. Nobody wants a game like that, and nobody should have to pay for it.

"I want to see developers making games with the same care and craft as Nintendo"

I think there is going to be a stellar future for the Switch, but it would be a shame if it ran the path of the Wii and Wii U: a golden path for Nintendo only because thirdparties would rather flood the market.

Kenneth Wesley

Fair up to a point, but now we've been nursed through a 13-hour flight by portable *Skyrim*, we're not sure we agree. If Switch continues to sell at its current rate, though, devs will have no alternative but to abandon the quick cash-ins and support it properly.

Guns out

With the latest mass shooting (hopefully still Parkland, by the time you read this), is it finally time for videogames to take a good look at themselves?

My knee-jerk reaction is a common one: videogames are obviously not, in any way, to blame for violent acts! But our entrenched reluctance to even have a discussion is little better than the attitude of the Second Amendment enthusiasts.

A game cannot shoot someone, but a gun is just a tool; and cannot evoke an emotional response like a game can. We can defend our hobby, our passion, and still conduct a thorough self-examination.

John Norris

We hope it's still Parkland by the time you read this too, John. There is absolutely a sensible discussion to be had about the levels of violence in contemporary games. Unfortunately, none of the people that want to have said discussion are actually sensible.

New horizons

It's been more than a year already since I moved from Italy (I'm no native speaker) to the UK to work in videogame localisation. Not the best time to relocate to the former Albion Empire, you might argue, but here I am, undaunted.

I was (positively) surprised to see how game prices can be significantly lower here compared to my native country. Big second-hand retail stores allowed me also to get a retro compatible Wii and a respectable bunch of Gamecube classics, *Eternal Darkness* included (I never got a Gamecube back then)! Then, one day, as I was heading to Italy for the Christmas holidays, I started browsing some videogame magazines at the airport. I don't know for what astrological reasons I had absolutely never heard of **Edge** before, but after getting the last three issues of 2017, I went for the annual subscription.

You are probably used to getting praise, so



www.facebook.com/edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

I am going to focus on the couple of things I personally find great. The first one is the quality of the interviews and special articles which never fail to appear in every issue, giving us the chance to get to know the people behind the creativity and will to entertain (and more, of course). The second one… well, an Italian would say, "**Edge** looks at no one's face" – an idiomatic expression meaning you don't check who you are addressing before saying what you think. It's a delicate matter, and I am quite sure I've overhit my character restriction a long time ago, so I will finish by saying that it was very nice to find an editorial staff able to jot down their thoughts without second guessing themselves. At least, this is the impression I got. Keep up the good work, and thanks for helping me to enlarge my lexical drafting board.
Luca Rungi

Welcome, Luca – and thanks for the kind words. Not to tempt fate, but it's been a while since we've had any real vitriol in the **Edge** postbag. Either we're finally getting somewhere, or they've tired themselves out.

On the pile

Every gamer with a family and a mortgage knows only too well the law that states the number of games in your library is inversely proportional to the free time available to actually play them.

It seems churlish to complain about having too many games to play or too much choice, but I am sometimes overwhelmed by the exponential expansion of media content. Maybe this comes across as trite nostalgia but I miss the days when I would buy a game, finish it and then trade it for another. Each game got the attention it deserved. My gaming experience now is much more fractured.

I have a similar problem with music. With my Amazon Music subscription I have access to about 40 million songs; I'm discovering tons of new music but I don't engage with it in the same way I did when I used to buy five or six albums a year.

My son was given an Xbox One for his tenth birthday recently and had 150 games ready for download the first time he switched it on (a result of having linked his account with his elder brother). One hundred and fifty!! Sometimes he'll stare at the Home screen for a full ten minutes, paralysed by the amount of choice, before abandoning the console to watch other people play games on YouTube.

Frequently he'll look at me and ask, "What game should I play, Dad?" I glimpse a future where entertainment media content has reached critical mass and we will all need a personal AI to tell us what we should play, watch or listen to.
Chris Davis

We sense an opportunity here for an **Edge**-powered smart assistant to help you make difficult gaming choices. Assuming you're fine with only ever being told to play *Overwatch* or *Puzzle & Dragons*, that is. Oh, and sorry to add to the pile, but we're afraid you just won a PlayStation Plus sub.

Shed end

It's been a particularly tough year so far for UK retail. Maplin and Toys R Us have bitten the dust, and seem unlikely to be the last. Many stores seem to have been just sort of existing for the past few years, with low interest rates reducing the pressure to make any actual profit.

Now the bubble, if you can call it that, is bursting, how long has UK videogame retail got? Like most **Edge** readers, I expect, I don't use high-street retail for my game purchases, because I've had my fingers burnt one too many times in the past. Eye-watering prices, poor stock of anything but the newest games, and the dreaded upsell at the till have kept me away for years. I recently stuck my head round the door of the local Game, and it was more of a videogame-merchandise store than an actual videogame retailer, with a window display full of stolen phones. It's getting harder and harder to see the point in it.

But I know that when the time finally comes, I'll miss it. Games are too important to not have a home on the high street, even if that home smells bad and never seems to have the thing you're looking for. Is the writing on the wall for the high-street game store? If there's still time to save it, what needs to happen?
James Wilson

Well, you'd need to start spending money there, and so would we all – which, let's face it, isn't going to happen. It's a brutal time for retail, but let's not forget that the companies currently dying did an awful lot of killing in their day, and maybe their demise will open the door for small, passionate, principled indies to return.

Real talk

The last time I wrote in, ten-odd years ago, my email was somehow replicated across three or four issues, for some fault or other. The cynic I am, I blamed the content of it, ARGs, for this fault. These alternative-reality games, so popular in the mid to late '00s (our post-*Majestic* world) were constantly utilised as ways of exciting us about games (*Halo 2*) or TV shows (Lost).

It seems now in the era or direct address, with Twitter et al at the forefront of our consumptive society, that these more subtle and subversive ways of engaging with an audience have died out. It's a shame as outside of an actual game community these felt like the best way to engage and connect an audience together.

Is there any hope for the ARG?
Martin Hollis

If you want our response to this, you'll need to take the first letter of the third word from the fourth line of body copy on each right-hand page for the next 12 issues of **Edge**. Then, we will have wasted roughly as much of your time as Lost did of ours. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

One thing Tim Berners-Lee probably didn't foresee in 1989 was that the worldwide web would inexorably become the biggest engine of fake news the world has ever seen. According to a YouGov poll last year, most people think they are good at distinguishing between reliable and dubious information, but only 4% of those surveyed could do so reliably. Meanwhile, the accuracy of what some people call the "mainstream media" and Donald Trump calls "the fake news" has been systematically downgraded in the mind of the general population. So it is heartening to read a study by two Cambridge researchers suggesting that videogames might be able to help.

At first glance, admittedly, this sounds unlikely. Videogames themselves are a rich source of fake news about the second world war or the likelihood of encountering dragons while wearing hotpants and carrying two pistols. But it turns out that if you design a videogame in which the player is guided to create and disseminate fake news on Twitter, they might subsequently be better able to avoid falling for misinformation.

The webgame "Bad News" is a simple multiple-choice text-based game in which you are led to amass social-media followers and credibility while seeding fake stories: that the cause of an air crash has been covered up, for example, or that a terrifying new dog disease is on the loose, or that Trump has just declared war on North Korea. The tone is marvellously sardonic. Early on you are encouraged to create a website, leading to the congratulatory message: "A minute ago you were just an angry citizen, now you're a big shot editor-in-chief running a real news site." And you feel a real sense of achievement after blowing up some scientific non-story to receive the congratulatory message: "You've destroyed all nuance in the debate. Well done!"

By the end of the game you have received badges for learning how to discredit opponents (claiming, for instance, that the head of a fact-checking website organises secret orgies), impersonate others, polarise debates, troll people, play to your followers' emotions, and fabricate conspiracies. The game manages to explain how such strategies work at the same time as congratulating you on using them: "Good idea. By targeting a large, faceless organization, you can manipulate your source material and craft a believable theory"; or "Excellent choice! Using doctored images as evidence is a tried and true disinformation technique."



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

In the game you are led to amass social-media followers and credibility while seeding fake stories

This is all authentically satisfying, and the pleasure of seeing one's follower count rise is a salient reminder of how gamified social media already is. Now I feel like I could get a job in a Russian troll factory (or rather, sockpuppet factory), but the purpose of this game is not to train a new generation of fake newsers; it's to enable the player to identify the same strategies when used by others.

The study authors Jon Roozenbeek and Sander van der Linden tested an earlier, card-based version of this game on secondary-school pupils. According to "inoculation theory" in communications science, we are better able to resist noxious input if we are prepared with "mental antibodies". While such antibodies may be introduced with standard critical-thinking lessons, the researchers think that "active inoculation" by leading the player actually to do bad things could be more effective. "We theorise that by placing news consumers in the shoes of (fake) news producers, they are not merely exposed to small portions of misinformation (as is the case with passive inoculation)," they explain, "but are instead prompted to think proactively about how people might be misled in order to achieve a goal (winning the game)."

Does it work? Well, at the beginning of both versions, players are asked to rate a selection of tweets — some from the New York Times, others from "alternative" sources — on a reliability scale. At the end one rates them again. It turns out that, after playing the game, study participants were better able to identify fake news, and they were also more emotionally engaged in the subjects discussed, eg the refugee crisis.

The authors stress that these results are "exploratory", but they are interesting both politically and culturally. One thing there has been a lot of fake news about over the years, after all, is the supposed educational promise of interactive media, the alleged revolution of iPads in classrooms and so on. But this may be one videogame that really can change minds. Just don't take my word for it.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

Four-and-a-bit years of parenting later, I can at last claim a sort of victory. It is, admittedly, all relative, like celebrating a slender 2-1 loss after a long season of 5-0 pastings. But I will take it. I know a number of Peppa Pig episodes off by heart; I know the names of all the members of the Paw Patrol, and even the backstories of many of its incidental characters. It has been miserable at times, but it has finally paid off: my son has finally got into *Mario*.

And I mean *really* into. Previous trips overseas have left me with near-impossible demands for the present I must always buy him in order to assuage my absent-dad guilt (thanks again to the PR flacks who once helped me cover every inch of an eight-floor Osaka department store in search of a very specific dinosaur). Yet when I asked what he'd like brought back from Japan recently, he asked simply for Luigi. A doddle. I could have sorted that before I'd even left the airport, though instead it gave me an excuse to trawl Akihabara looking for ways to spend my savings on *Monster Hunter* tat.

While his previous obsessions have meant I've had to endure lengthy sessions of banal children's telly, this is different. Still too young to work a controller himself, he instead insists that I play through the *Mario* series while he watches. Naturally, I am fine with this, and after we'd reached and conquered the Darker Side Of The Moon in *Super Mario Odyssey*, he asked which game we'd play next.

This presented a conundrum. Where do you go after something that subverts so much of what we expect from a *Mario* game? A friend and I have talked about wanting our offspring to start with *Super Mario World*, the first game we both fell truly in love with. But would the kid click with its relative simplicity after *Odyssey*'s relentless, freewheeling invention? I wasn't sure, and that meant ruling out pretty much the entire 2D oeuvre too, for now at least. It also meant pushing the *Galaxy* games down the running order, too, since they were probably too much of a headfuck, even next to *Odyssey*.



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

I've spent the last couple of months flitting around three decades of history, and it's been enlightening

We settled on *Super Mario 3D World*; I figured the 3D styling, and the abundance of different power-ups, would be a logical next step. I was right, and boy, has that game aged well; naturally tighter and more focused than *Odyssey*, but no less creative, we blitzed through it, reaching Champion's Road in a couple of weeks.

Then came *New Super Mario Bros U*, since the Wii U was already set up and I thought I'd give another chance to a game I profoundly disliked. I quickly realised there are few things worse than playing a game you don't like with someone whose presence forbids you from swearing ("What the flub!"). Then came *Super Mario World*, which is still perfect. We're now on *Galaxy*, and the kid cranes his neck into all sorts of angles struggling to keep a bearing on Mario's movement. We've also started *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle*, which, to my surprise, he understands brilliantly.

It's a fascinating process, as well as a fun one, and he's now coming home from nursery with drawings which, while looking to me like the same nonsensical scrawls as always, he insists are levels he's designed (last night he gave me two: Freeze Flame Road, and Freeze Flame Hot Road. We need to work on the names). As we go, I'm trying to explain the basics of how *Mario* games – and therefore all games, really – are constructed, the way mechanics are introduced, expanded upon and thrown away. He's starting to get it, and just as well: I've told him that once we've played a few more, we'll do it all again, this time with him at the controls.

Clearly it's having an effect on him, but it's impacted me in more ways than I expected. For one, I don't often get to sit down and play through multiple games in the same series in short order, and I'm finding myself connecting dots I never knew were there. But it's also made me reassess the importance of chronology. Whether you call games your profession or just a pastime, they are typically defined by the pursuit of the new. Yet I've spent the last couple of months flitting around three decades of history, and it's been enlightening. Now, once I've packed him off to bed, I don't just load up whichever hot new thing I feel I *should* be playing. I've started *Skyrim* again; I have a growing hankering for *Pilotwings*, and thinking about it, it's been too long since I played *God Hand*. If our review section seems a little thin for the next few issues, forgive me.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s editor. If anyone knows where his GameCube RGB cable has got to, please get in touch*

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ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

Reading the cover of **E**315 and its proclamation of an industry in crisis reminded me of the time in the mid-'90s when Amiga Power asked the Sensible Software crew whether anyone should buy a CD32, and the response came back that you should save your money and buy a falafel instead. As an industry, we are in a perpetual state of changing the world, or suddenly failing and being less interesting than a late-night snack. Maybe that's because, while the industry in 2018 has more players, makes more money, is available on more platforms and is more present in daily life than at any other stage in its existence, it doesn't mean that you personally, and your game or game company, are not currently completely screwed.

And the most predictable way to be screwed right now is something that nobody really likes to talk about: marketing and communication. Witness the sad decline of otherwise decent 'big' games beneath the crushing weight of blessed loot crates and other soon-to-be-illegal pseudo-gambling systems. Shudder at the sad lack of sales for the well-executed 2D action game with a neat art style but unremarkable mechanics.

Buying any piece of entertainment has always been an emotional issue more than a practical one, and quality is not the axis upon which it turns. The movie industry has known this for years, and it's a core driver of their new focus on 'infinite' franchises such as Marvel's. The assumption is that your emotional investment in the collection of characters as a whole will push you to watch the occasional shoddy movie. Videogames are not immune to this. I remember a study by EA a few years back that basically showed that once you were above an 80 review average, every point cost you a lot more money and didn't generate any more sales – the important issue was minimum quality, and the driver was a connection to a brand or series the player had already bought into.

Whether you're a small indie title or a lumbering corporate behemoth, you need to find a reason for your audience to care. Without the power of a big brand, you need to build that connection, knowing that failing to rouse their interest, or abusing their trust, are the quickest ways to fail.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

We're off to GDC to meet 37 publishers in three days, an exhausting process that will give us huge insight

For me, this means acknowledging you are in a perpetual state of pitching your ideas: first to yourself, then to the team, then perhaps a potential publishing partner, and finally, if you're fortunate enough, to your potential audience. Each of those moments is a chance to consider why you think someone should give you their most valuable resource: their time. Publishers will ask you the practical questions: 'Who would buy this? Why? Why would they play it again?' Even if you keep your game and self-publish, these are questions you need to answer in order to give yourself a chance at success.

You need an emotional hook, and a story to tell, to grab people's attention. The story can be about the team (Bonfire Studios: some of the key people who built Blizzard are making something new!) or it can be about the style of game (Thatgamecompany: games can be a pure experience instead of a mere test of skill!), or it can be about what you want the game to mean (11-bit Studios: *This War Of Mine* is a game about the casualties of war, not the combatants).

So with that in mind, we're off to GDC to meet 37 publishers in three days, an exhausting process that will give us a huge amount of insight into whether our pitch is resonating at all, and whether we will need to come back to Montreal and talk seriously about the game we're making.

Which is not to say that publishers are always correct, or that their interests are always aligned with developers. For example, one of the biggest indie successes out of Montreal is the *Outlast* series from Red Barrels, but no publisher was ever going to greenlight a linear, R-rated, singleplayer horror game. They would have said, 'People want to play online with friends', that 'R ratings shrink your audience too much', and that 'linear games don't sell anymore'.

But Red Barrels knew their emotional message on that first game: it was a scary horror game. A game where you had to run and couldn't fight back. And a game where you were all alone. Better still, they had the courage to not bend their vision because they understood what they were making. The messaging was clear, the team stayed focused and last I checked they'd sold more than two million copies. Crisis, it seems, can be averted – even if you ignore the experts.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick


LAYSTATION
GOD OF WAR
20·04·18
God of War outputs 2160p. 4K/HDR TV required for 4K and HDR. God of War® ©2005-2018 Sony Computer Entertainment America LLC. "God of War" is a registered trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. All rights reserved. "PS", "PlayStation" and "PS4" are registered trademarks of Sony Interactive Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved.



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Cut out and keep

Whether we use the word or not, we all work to templates of some kind; knowing how something worked before makes it much easier to make it work again, after all. In games, some developers carry their templates around with them, a signature style that runs through all their work.

That's certainly the case for Jordan Thomas, a veteran of *Thief: Deadly Shadows* and *BioShock 2*, who returns this month with the dark, systems-driven horror game *The Blackout Club* (p42). Its tale of four teenagers facing down strange events in their suburban idyll may feel suspiciously well timed given the success of Stranger Things, but it is clearly, recognisably, a Jordan Thomas work.

More commonly, though, templates are starting points; things to be mucked around with, instead of merely built upon. That ethos gives us *Hokuto Ga Gotoku* (p46), a bonkers, gruesome blend of *Yakuza* and *Fist Of The North Star*. It gives us *Dead Static Drive* (p50), a terrifying road trip succinctly described by its creator as *Grand Theft Cthulhu*. And it gives us *Trailblazers*, a game that combines *Splatoon* with *F-Zero* and emerges with its own intriguing identity.

Yet it's *God Of War* (p38) that feels like the bravest of this month's crop, if only because of the stakes involved. Once a game about ripping the heads, arms or wings off everything in front of you, it is now about raising a child. Okay, to Kratos that seems to mostly mean teaching the little one to be better at killing, but it's rare we see this sort of deviation from a template from such a famous name. Whether it comes off or not, in games, we always prefer a change to a rest.

MOST WANTED

Dark Souls Remastered
PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
The actor Peter Serafinowicz once told us about how he'd spent an entire transatlantic flight playing *Dark Souls* on his laptop, and ever since it has been the dream. The Switch version may, technically, be the runt of this imminent remaster's litter. But it's likely to be the only one we'll ever need.

Dreams PS4
We still can't quite believe the things we saw blossom from Media Molecule's game-creation sandbox during **E**316's studio visit. Frustratingly, at time of writing, there's still no sign of this year's promised beta: plans for our horror debut, *Magazine Publishing Simulator*, remain firmly on ice.

Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker
Switch
The Wii U adventure will find a whole new audience on Switch in July, and we couldn't think of a better home for its charming 3D puzzle-box scenarios. The port will include levels from *Odyssey* – a brief glimpse of New Donk Mini has us in raptures.

H Y
P E

GOD OF WAR

PlayStation's big brute shows his softer side in an adventure that's equal parts epic and emotional

Developer Santa Monica Studio
Publisher SIE
Format PS4
Origin US
Release April 20

Anger is easy. Give a Greek god two massive blades, a tragic backstory and a thirst for revenge, and the rest almost takes care of itself. The Kratos of the early 2000s would rip heads from bodies and roast people alive without a second thought. Fast-forward to 2018's *God Of War*, and we find ourselves in control of a Kratos struggling to keep his brutal instincts in check for the sake of his young son. Anger is easy – exercising some restraint, it turns out, is a lot harder.

And that, creative director **Cory Barlog** says, was the point. "Everything about this game was the hard way," he tells us. "We were kind of hitting the same note over and over again. We thought we'd nailed a formula, and we perhaps became a little fearful of moving beyond that." It was time for *God Of War* to grow up. And, while much has changed in the latest iteration, there's a ring of familiarity to everything we play.

Atreus, for instance, is undoubtedly his father's son. Kratos' boy is a creature of instinct, a brief deer-hunting excursion an illuminating insight into the pair's nascent relationship. When Atreus fires an eager arrow at an animal and scares it off, Kratos barks angrily at him – but softens visibly after Atreus' apology, and replies, "Do not be sorry. Be better." It's curious to watch the Ghost Of Sparta relearn how to interact on a human level, and the hunt leads to some intimate scenes in which you, as Kratos, help steady your son's bow, and later his hand as he delivers the killing blow to the beast.

This early tableau sets up the central theme of *God Of War*: you are training Atreus to become a man. He even has his own skill tree, willingly charging into battle beside Kratos to serve as both backup fire and, occasionally, monster bait. Hitting Square has him fire arrows into the enemy your reticule is on, dealing modest damage and, more importantly, drawing attention away from Kratos. In a fight against a fire troll, we attempt to use Atreus to aim for its weak points – two glowing spots on its arm and leg – but he's rarely positioned at the right angle to strike exactly where we'd like.

Initially, it's irritating, but it's less a precision attack than a tactical boon. But as we learn to become more aware of Atreus' movements around the battlefield, there's potential for more particular positioning to become a niche layer of strategy – especially when we unlock a skill that lets Atreus stun enemies close by. But, in the family tradition, Atreus' hot-headedness can lead to trouble. He'll sometimes be scooped up by marauders, meaning you'll have to interfere. It's occasional enough not to be disruptive, and lends a new kind of tension to fights beyond simply fearing for your own safety. ▶

Kratos' son Atreus can translate the runic stories carved into the 11 shrines hidden in the world, which tell tales of the Giants of Legend





Be assured, however – *God Of War* is no Nordic picnic, thanks to a variety of enemies such as teleporting Revenants, long-range fireball-casters and ice-resistant foes. Kratos' chain blades are gone, replaced by the frost-imbued Leviathan Axe that he can wield, aim, throw and recall. Once you find your rhythm, scraps with multiple enemy types are dynamic. We lob the axe at an enemy firing projectiles, move to melee the frost-resistant guy flanking – then dodge sideways and press Triangle to recall the axe back through Projectile Guy, finishing him off and tearing through a fresh line of grunts in the process. Hurling it into an enemy to freeze them in place and then punch them into shards; upgrading it so catching it with perfect timing means our next throw explodes on contact to deal AOE damage – in any situation, the axe feels fantastic. And doesn't Santa Monica Studio just know it. It's used in every environmental puzzle we come across, freezing gates in place, hitting out-of-reach runes to break magical seals on chests and aligning the rings of a giant puzzle.

God Of War deals with what it is to be a good father, to set an example, and to be a man

The methods may have changed, then, but the results feel familiar: combo-led combat, inventive environmental puzzles and, yes, some good old-fashioned head-stomping. It's the game's first boss fight against The Stranger that really stands out. Normally, series openings pit Kratos against gigantic beings, hammering home the sense of scale. The Stranger is a weedy, kooky bloke who knocks on Kratos' front door and politely requests fisticuffs. Eventually, however, it becomes clear that he possesses superhuman strength, leading to a largely automated, but visually spectacular, showdown.

It's scale shown not via an overhead camera, but in a more thematic sense: through "the circumventing of expectations," Barlog says. "*God Of War* has always had that sense of the James Bond, or Indiana Jones, opener," he says. "We got caught up in the idea of constantly topping ourselves – so much so that we lost a bit of the 'why', and the context, because we were just like, 'Bigger! Bigger!' So I said, 'We're throwing all of that out.'" In this moment – made vulnerable by his desperation to protect his son, and brute strength often ineffectual versus this elusive being – the muscle-bound god we're controlling feels very small indeed.

In another sense, Kratos feels bigger than ever. He now has several sides to him, his previously one-dimensional rage cast in new lights: a result of grief for a lost loved one, worry for his son, frustration at the difficult responsibility of raising a child – and a fear that Atreus might grow up to make the same mistakes he did. Just a couple of hours in, *God Of War* deals with some timely issues: what it is to be a good father, to set an example, and to be a man. A father of a young son himself, it's no coincidence that Barlog's game touches upon these themes. "It made me think, what is the concept of masculinity?" he says. "How do you share with your child what it is to be strong and vulnerable, and emotional availability being an important part of the human experience?"

In the age of angry young men, *God Of War*'s evolution is not just a statement of creative intent, but also a philosophical one. Barlog felt duty-bound to progress the series in a way that would be meaningful to the young modern audience sat in front of it. "As a father, I felt very responsible," he says. "As a creative, I also feel like we are mirrors of the world around us. We are, in a way, role models, the way that parents are role models. We model behaviour, and we're saying, 'This is what I want my best self to be', and that's what I reflect back to my son."

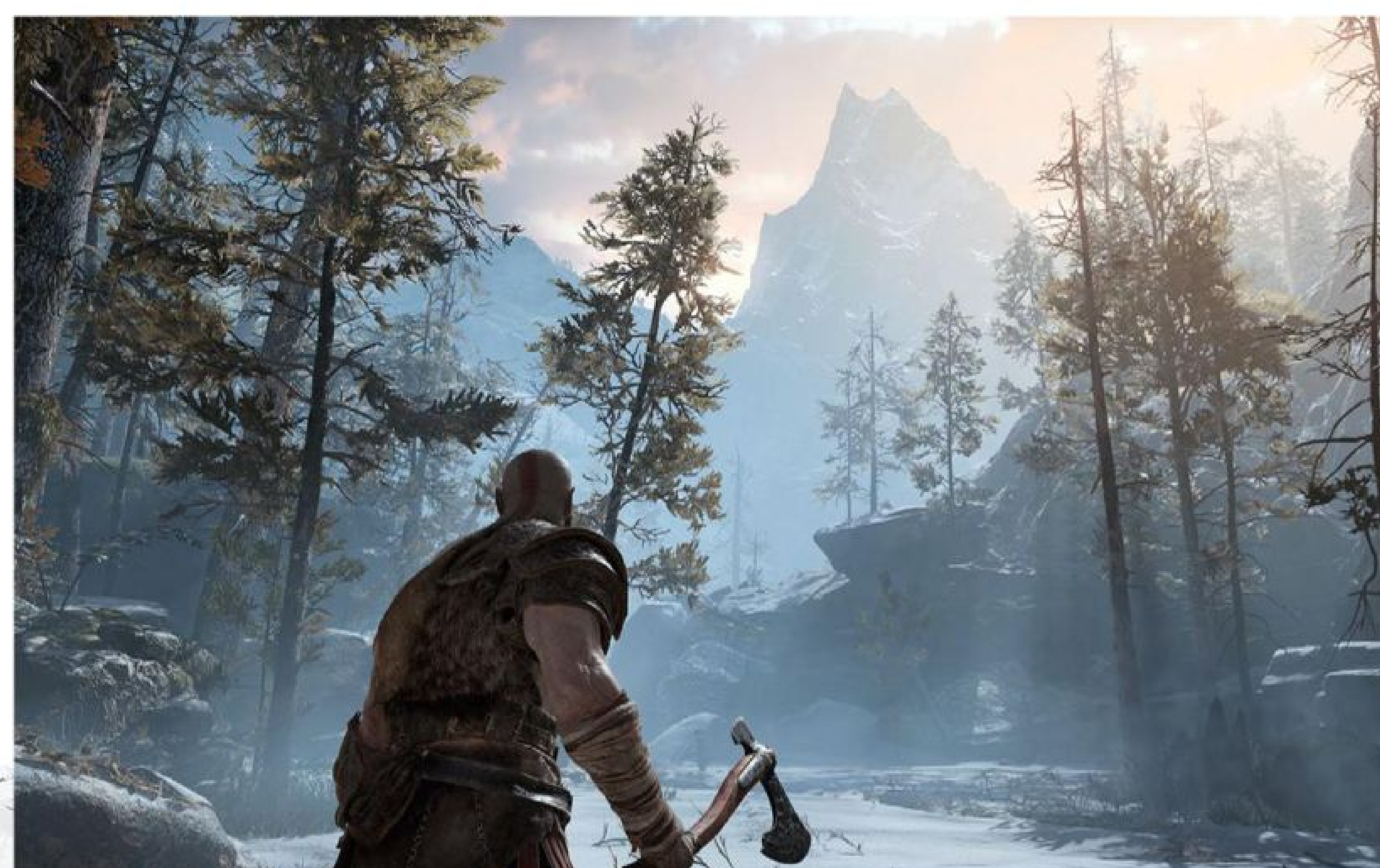
It makes sense that *God Of War* has been treated with such respect and care, remaining recognisably epic while also gracefully stepping into a new, more mature era of storytelling in games. The series is, after all, Barlog's baby, and he wants it to represent the changes in his own outlook on the world. "The work that I do, I want that to model that," he continues. "Kratos says, 'Don't be sorry, be better' – I think we are tackling this theme of, what does it mean to be better? It doesn't always mean that you succeed. It means that you aspire – that struggle, that willingness to not give up, means you don't have to win every time. It means you just have to be conscious." ■

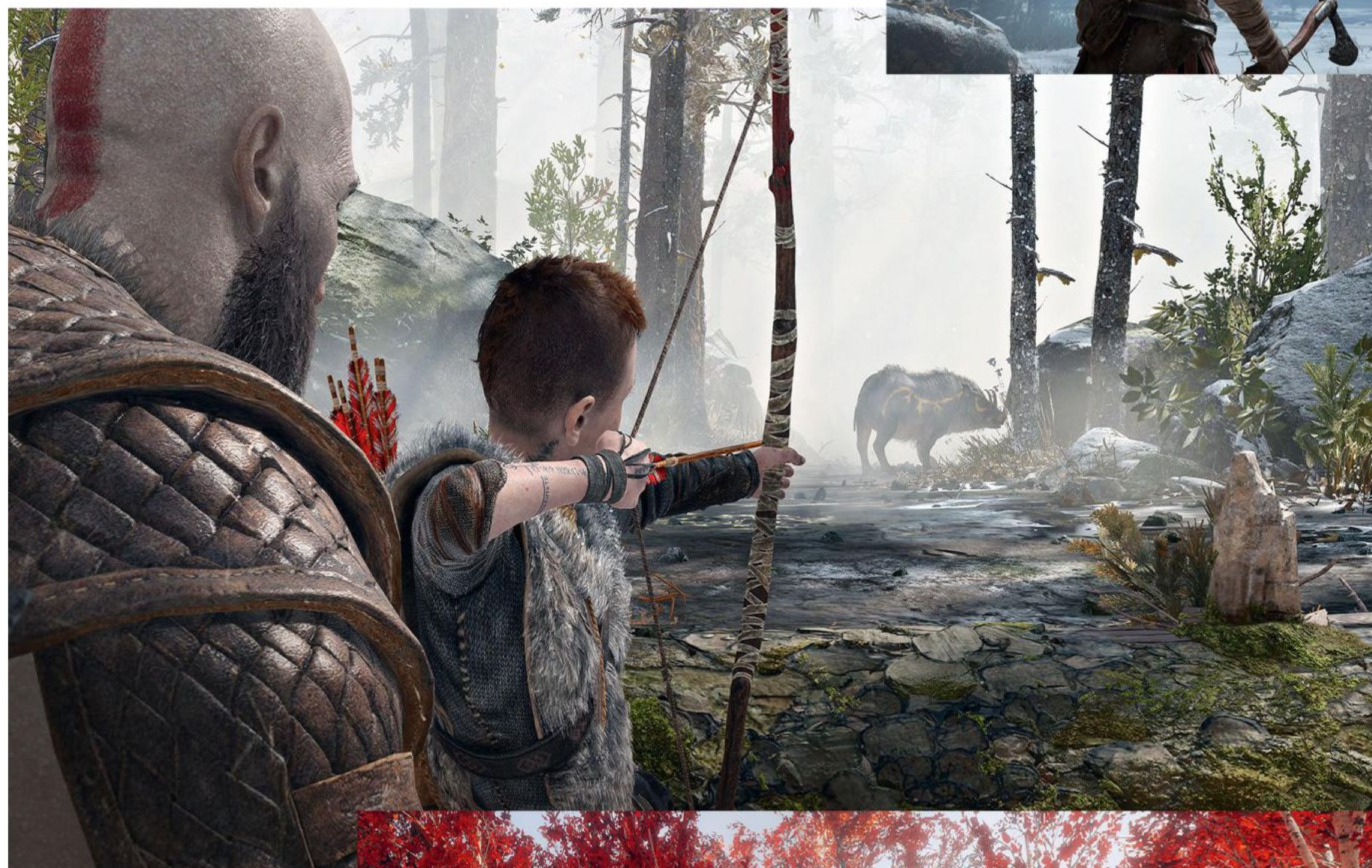


Spartan existence

The new *God Of War* is stuffed with RPG systems far beyond its extensive upgradeable skill trees. Early on in the game, Kratos runs into one of the dwarves who forged his Leviathan Axe, and from then on is able to visit the Dwarven Shop to both craft stronger armour and upgrade weapons. You can customise weapons by outfitting their slots with light and strong runic attacks, gems and pommels found in hidden chests or purchased from the workshop (our axe, for instance, benefits greatly from Hel's Touch, a light runic attack with burst knockback). You can also increase both Kratos' maximum health and stamina meters by picking up a limited number of collectibles hidden around the world.



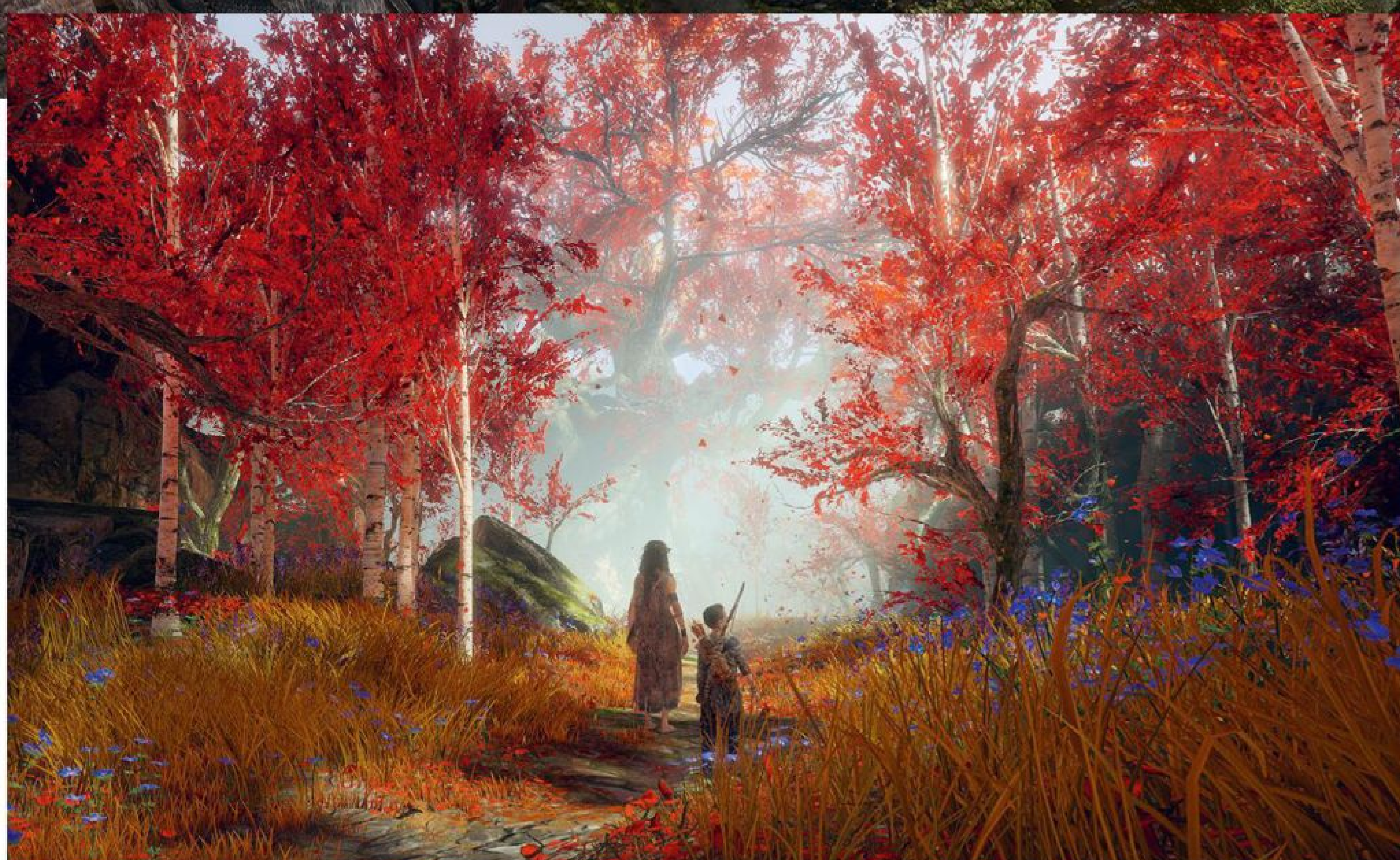








TOP **The close camera angle can call for the (remappable) 'quick turn' move in combat.** ABOVE **The father-son scenes show Atreus' inherited rage issues – and also a nasty cough and allusions to him being sick. Parents, beware.** MAIN **A second, far more controlled hunting scene later in our demo shows Atreus' progress. We're actually quite proud**



TOP **These golden handprints are the work of Atreus' mother, who marked trees for her pyre – and another purpose, revealed later.** RIGHT **It's not all chilly Nordic forest. The end of our demo has us follow a mysterious healer to a fairytale glade, wherein we find a giant, treehouse-bearing tortoise**

HYPE

THE BLACKOUT CLUB

Brave the horrors of Stranger Things with friends

Developer/publisher Question
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin US
Release 2019

Shortly after *Thief: Deadly Shadows* was released in 2004, its lead designer, **Jordan Thomas**, interviewed for a job at Valve. He and ex-**Edge** columnist Randy Smith had created *Deadly Shadows'* standout level, Robbing The Cradle, a study in dread-inspiring horror game design set in an abandoned orphanage. "So this guy in the interview said, 'Ah, your level was tight, but I had to quit playing. It was too scary.' And I was like, 'Oh. Well, shit.' That was not the intended effect! I wanted to bring people to the point of a new fear threshold, not to cause them to walk away."

The Blackout Club is, in part, his attempt at a do-over, a modulation of the horror game for players who aren't into jump scares and the sensory extremes of the genre. It's also an attempt to recapture a particular flavour of horror Thomas experienced when he played *System Shock 2* with a friend using a patch that added a cooperative mode. "We fed off each other's fear, but we were also bolstered by the companionship, so we would stare at one another and speculate at the implications of something we'd just heard or seen. In some ways, *The Blackout Club* is my love letter to that experience."

The Blackout Club, then, is a cooperative horror game in which up to four players are cast as teenagers facing strange events occurring in their home town. Their parents and teachers don't seem to care. In fact, the teens see them behaving oddly by night, too, so they've taken it on themselves to uncover the truth. But WiFi and mobile phones are banned because they interfere with a nearby government radio telescope (the setting is inspired by the real town of Green Bank, West Virginia), so to summon help the teens must smuggle their evidence to the outside world.

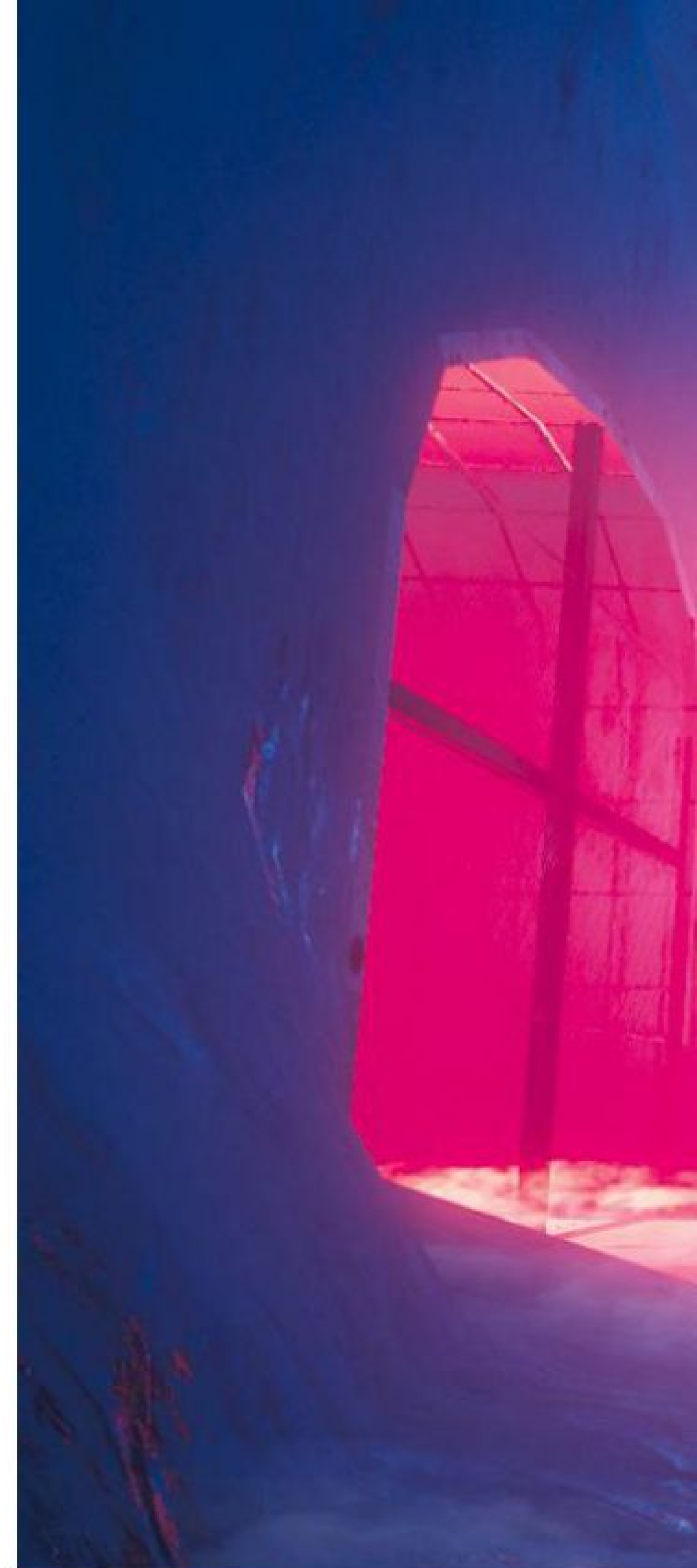
Each session, which takes place at night, begins with the game generating a set of objectives which the players will stealthily go out into the town to carry out. A common type will be to capture video footage of weird happenings, some of which are prescribed by the objective and others spontaneously occurring during play. But as the players traverse the streets to reach them they'll have to deal with various nocturnal threats. Sleepwalkers are blind but will grab at the players when they hear them, while lucids, which are less common and more threatening, hold out a bright light in an attempt to expose them. Anxious to preserve the mystery of these figures, Thomas won't explain them other than to say that they're the adult members of the town – their parents, teachers and elders of the community – and part of its conspiracy, whether willingly or unknowingly. But as ▶



Jordan Thomas, co-founder, Question

The Blackout Club's player-controlled teens are built to evoke such horror-fantasy classics as Stephen King's It, ET, and, of course, newcomer Stranger Things







Some weapons, like the crossbow, can harm your enemies, but hurting them will attract the attention of a more dangerous foe

players complete objectives, such as having one member of the team allow themselves to be grabbed by a lucid and another recording it, the mystery will start to untangle.

"These events have some kind of value to the Blackout Club," says Thomas, who explains that the game will create objectives which will try to expose events to players that they haven't seen before, or recently, while steadily raising the challenge. The more difficult to capture the event is, the higher the score it'll yield, and scores play into a progression system which unlocks player upgrades. These add abilities to a menu from which players will choose a deck to take out for an evening. One allows them to sprint indefinitely, another to knock down enemies; think of them as a grounded equivalent of *BioShock*'s tonics. The comparison is appropriate, since Thomas was creative director of *BioShock 2*, and both games are founded on the principle of giving players creative agency through abilities and systems. "*The Blackout Club* has an alchemical approach to systems design in that there are many right answers to a problem we might pose," says Thomas. "It's up to you to combine those elements."

But even with these powers, the teens are just teens, placing its horror in a constant sense of vulnerability. "When we chose to let you play as teenagers we were saying that you're physically smaller than your foes, so you have to leap on their backs, grab them around the neck and steer them desperately for a few seconds before they shake you off," says Thomas. "We're also saying these kids are not murderers. This is not a gore-driven game. We're pretty tired of making games with violent gore as the payload. There are lots of variants of the horror game, and for me, the second you show me a drop of blood, a countdown begins and the more gore and viscera you put on screen, the less I feel."

Most weapons and tools are about temporarily repelling enemies to give a



ABOVE **Beneath the streets of the town are stranger locations, including a great instrument which records 'crimes' committed by players.** LEFT **The organisation you face comprises familiar adult figures from town, but it isn't clear if they're members by choice or somehow brainwashed**





LEFT **Capturing evidence of the behaviour of these strange figures on video is a key part of the game; your illicit smartphone only has a certain amount of storage so you'll need your shots to count, while also ensuring you don't get spotted**



chance of escape, though there are some, such as the crossbow, which do damage. But the game still retains the upper hand, since doing harm to enemies is considered a 'crime'. Under the streets is what Thomas describes as "a great instrument that records your crimes as a series of musical notes". These notes drive another, much more dangerous, enemy to relentlessly stalk the player who has committed the most crimes. Again, Thomas is loath to explain what this creature is, but it presents thrilling risks: once it has a player's scent, should they call it a night, or continue the mission at the risk of being picked off, one by one?

"This is not gore-driven. We're tired of making games with violent gore as the payload"

Thomas recalls a playtest which encapsulated the effect he hoped the monster would create. Producer Michael Kelly was the last player standing and, wishing to know where the creature was, he 'blacked out'. This ability allows a player to perceive its location by closing their eyes, and Kelly realised it was just at the other end of the hallway. Thinking it hadn't yet seen him, he looked away to figure out what to do, but as he glanced back over his shoulder again, it was suddenly on him. Kelly ran screaming out of the office. "We knew we had something at that moment because you cannot fake it in a scripted fashion. It was a thing of beauty. It's the moment I hope players have."

But because these scares are collectively experienced, and because they result from systems the player is an intimate part of, Thomas hopes they'll be more broadly appealing, or at least endurable, than those generated by most other horror games. *The Blackout Club*'s hope to tap into popular horror is reflected in its theme, too, which readily echoes Stranger Things, Steven King novels and It Follows. "The magic teen story has been around for thousands of years," says Thomas. "That rite of passage and the end of the world – there's a reason why every generation has a version of that story, going beyond pop culture and into myth."

The Blackout Club is a smart rallying call for the studio after its first release, the creatively ambitious game-within-a-game *The Magic Circle*, failed to find appeal to match its makers' legacies. "There was a moment of soul searching after we released it," Thomas says. "It was uncompromising and tickled only our senses of humour." Following player trends away from linear storytelling and into multiplayer seemed a wise follow-up. "But we didn't want to lose our soul in the process. We determined that co-op, horror and modern-suburban occult fantasy overlapped with our tastes, so we could wholeheartedly pursue it without feeling we'd lost anything." ■

Being teens, you can't take on your enemies directly, other than by clinging on to their backs for a few seconds to save a friend



Submersing the immersive

Several members of developer Question are veterans of classic immersive sims both old and new, including the *Thief* and *BioShock* series, *Dishonored* and *Prey*. But while *The Blackout Club* is rich with the genre's basis in powering creative play by presenting players with many interlocking systems, Thomas is resistant to the idea that it's a direct evolution from it. "I believe the term 'immersive sim' is quickly becoming irrelevant," he says, "While it will always be a powerful marker of a phase in game development's history, the tropes and design principles that used to be only crystallised by that term are now spreading out. It's no longer the property of a specific group of white dudes in a couple of very specific parts of the world, and that's probably for the best."

HYPE

HOKUTO GA GOTOKU

Fist Of The North Star meets Yakuza with predictably daft, and gruesome, results

Developer	Yakuza Studio
Publisher	Sega
Format	PS4
Origin	Japan
Release	Out now



Yes, it looks ridiculous, and while that might not have been manga artist Buronson's original intention, it's a fine fit for the *Yakuza* template ▶







TOP **This is a game of thick-skulled men with lustrous hair, enormous arms and comically tight buttocks.** ABOVE **A pseudo open-world element lets you out into the wasteland to forage for valuable supplies.** FAR LEFT **QTEs do the heavy lifting during the key parts of a fight – and grow more complex as you unlock even more damaging abilities.** LEFT **The clinic minigame asks you to heal up as many patients as you can before a timer expires**



HOKUTO GA GOTOKU

Kazuma Kiryu's been working out. He's grown his hair, too, though god knows what's going on with those disproportionately tiny buttocks. The dapper, dour hero of the *Yakuza* games shares a voice actor with Kenshiro, *Fist Of The North Star*'s protagonist, in this licensed repurposing of Kiryu's decade-old mechanical template. It's a fine fit. The two characters are similar in many ways, serious, sincere and honourable, ready and willing to get stuck in to any ne'er-do-wells who make the mistake of crossing them. Yet there's one huge difference between them. Kiryu, the legend goes, has never killed. Kenshiro racks up an action-movie bodycount in the first five minutes.

This is entirely appropriate given the source material, of course, yet it will still shock anyone that picks up *Hokuto Ga Gotoku* because of their love of the *Yakuza* games, rather than Buronson and Tetsuo Hara's manga. Kenshiro practises hokuto shinken, an ancient, mystical martial art which enables him to kill enemies from within. Pull off a Heat-style finishing move and, instead of a spot of Kiryu-style slapstick, his opponent will convulse and swell, their eyes bulging out of their bloated heads until they explode into blackness.

These moves are the beating, bloodied heart of the game's combat system, for better and worse. Whereas Kiryu has to build a meter to perform Heat moves, Kenshiro's are available from the off. Whittle an enemy's health down a little and an icon above their head invites you to move in for a grab move, and a subsequent button prompt begins the cinematic carnage. Each gory finisher builds a meter which, when full, unlocks a powered-up state that, in addition to buffing movement speed and damage, also expands Kenshiro's base moveset. The quickstep dash, for instance, becomes a somersault, out of which you can perform a powerful dive kick.

It's a novel twist on the *Yakuza* games' template, certainly, yet in practice rather kills the pace of combat. To play efficiently is to only really play it in short bursts, landing a few hits and kicking off a finisher as quickly as possible. While you are involved in killing blows – QTE prompts define how much damage the move does – there aren't many of them, at least early on, and so they quickly become repetitive. A sprawling skill tree, spread across four pages and powered by differently coloured tokens that you acquire as you level up, may lead to more variety later in the game. But after spending seven hours with the Japanese release, the balance of action to spectacle feels a little off.

Still, for this game's target audience, that's probably the right call. This is a fine work of fan service, which while telling an original story is firmly embedded in the world and lore of the manga, with all the main players present and correct. A post-release DLC will cater explicitly to purists, rearranging the game's difficulty to properly adhere to the source material; rather than the steady curve of the base game, boss characters' power will properly reflect their relative strength in the manga.

Each gory finisher builds a meter which, when full, unlocks a powered-up state

If you're coming to it from the *Yakuza* side, a preorder bonus will let you play through the whole thing as Kiryu. And there are a host of bonkers distractions, including a cabaret-management mode lifted directly from *Yakuza 0*, a repurposing of the series' baseball system that replaces the bat with a girder and the ball *with a truck*, bartending, and a minigame in a local clinic that lets Kenshiro put his hokuto shinken skills to positive, restorative use.

It's a curious thing, then. While the *Yakuza* games have long walked the tightrope between the seedy slapstick of a red-light district and gangster brutality, *Hokuto Ga Gotoku*'s relentless violence may stretch that concept a little bit too far; it's hard to accept the notion of a man, who just minutes ago turned two dozen thugs inside out, is now behind the bar in a tuxedo, mixing up wallbangers for punters. Not that we'd say so to his face, of course. ■



Fist impressions

Despite hitting Japanese shelves some 15 months after *Yakuza 6*, *Hokuto Ga Gotoku* does not make use of the new Dragon Engine. Instead it's built on the same tech as *Yakuza 0*; while that means a solid 60fps during open play, it can also feel like a step back, particularly in the look of the game. A cel-shaded aesthetic means characters escape the worst of it, but environments come off particularly badly; a post-apocalypse desert wasteland is never going to be easy on the eye, sure, but it's jarring stuff nonetheless.

Developer/publisher Kurtrussellfanclub
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Australia
Release 2019



DEAD STATIC DRIVE

A road trip where running out of gas is the least of your problems

As if the giant worms outside weren't enough, poor old Axel, who simply wanted to sit down with a cup of joe in his favourite diner, now has a machete-wielding psycho to worry about. The psycho in question, by the way, is us: our planned backdoor escape from the Tremors-like monsters out front goes horribly wrong when we swing our blade at the chain-link fence in our way and connect with Axel instead. He sprints around the side, evidently happier to take his chances with the worms.

Mike Blackney pitches his Roguelike road trip as *Grand Theft Cthulhu*, a pithy summary that might be misleading depending on what you expect from a *GTA* game. It's like Rockstar's series in the sense that you can steal cars, but mostly because it offers a reactive sandbox that can produce moments of surprise in the ways its various systems collide. And yes, there are plenty of moments of emergent physical comedy. Before the machete episode, we find a big rig, and park up carefully next to a police car. The second we climb out, a worm suddenly burrows up, flipping the truck entirely. We just about escape into the diner, where we meet Axel, whose bad day is about to get much worse.

> ***This may be a Roguelike of sorts, but your character is essentially invincible***

Blackney is not, it's fair to say, entirely sympathetic to our tale of woe. "Oh no!" he gasps, laughing long and loud. "That's great," he says. "I love friendly fire. I want to make sure it's still fair, so you don't get punished immediately. I hate insta-killing players, I hate ruining their game immediately. Like when you know you've killed an NPC that was valuable and you might as well restart? But yeah, I love games where you have that as an effect."

Fairness is clearly important to Blackney. This is a game that presents several threats beyond the worms, with very different monsters awaiting in later towns. But the designer wants to give his players room to experiment, to discover the functions of the myriad items you can stuff into your pockets – and your car's trunk – and to try different tactics to defeat those creatures. Some items have multiple uses: a hammer can be used as a weapon, or as a tool to board up a door, for example. It's pointless to do so in this instance, since the worms can't come inside. However, Blackney says, "There are creatures that are made out of leaves. They're human-shaped, but they can just dissipate into leaves and then pass through anything that's got a gap. So if you barricade a door or a window, they can just pass right through it. But if you light parts of the place on fire..."

Much of the game will be about learning those tricks, he says: some will follow real-world logic, and others will be a matter of playing around with different variables and stumbling across unorthodox solutions. Punishments for failure won't be too harsh: this may be a Roguelike of sorts, but your character is essentially invincible. "If you die, you'll wake up and there'll be people around you," Blackney explains. "They'll say, 'We've patched you up as best we could, but you've got to watch yourself out there'." And if we've wounded or killed any of the locals? "Then you'll just wake up in a different location per town, but it'll be an alley, or a seedy old motel that's shut down – some kind of dodgy place. And you won't heal as quickly. Instead of six hours, it might take you 12 to recuperate."

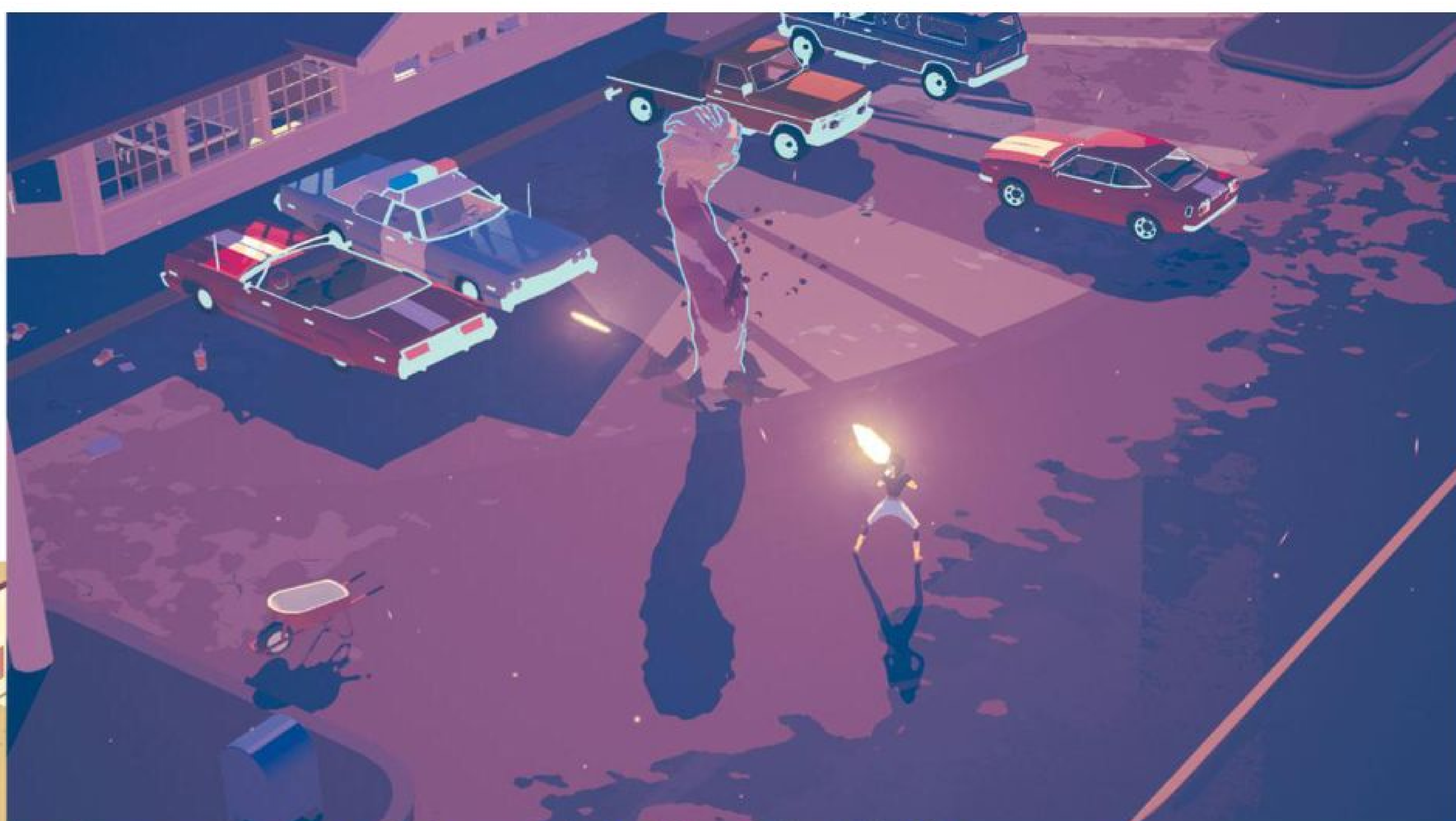
The time penalty is crucial, since the game will finish after 30 days, your ending determined by how far you've managed to get in that time. "Whatever ending you get at that stage, that's your lot. And then you can replay it," Blackney says. It's hard to imagine many players turning down the invitation to head back out on the road again. We just won't invite Axel to ride shotgun this time. ■

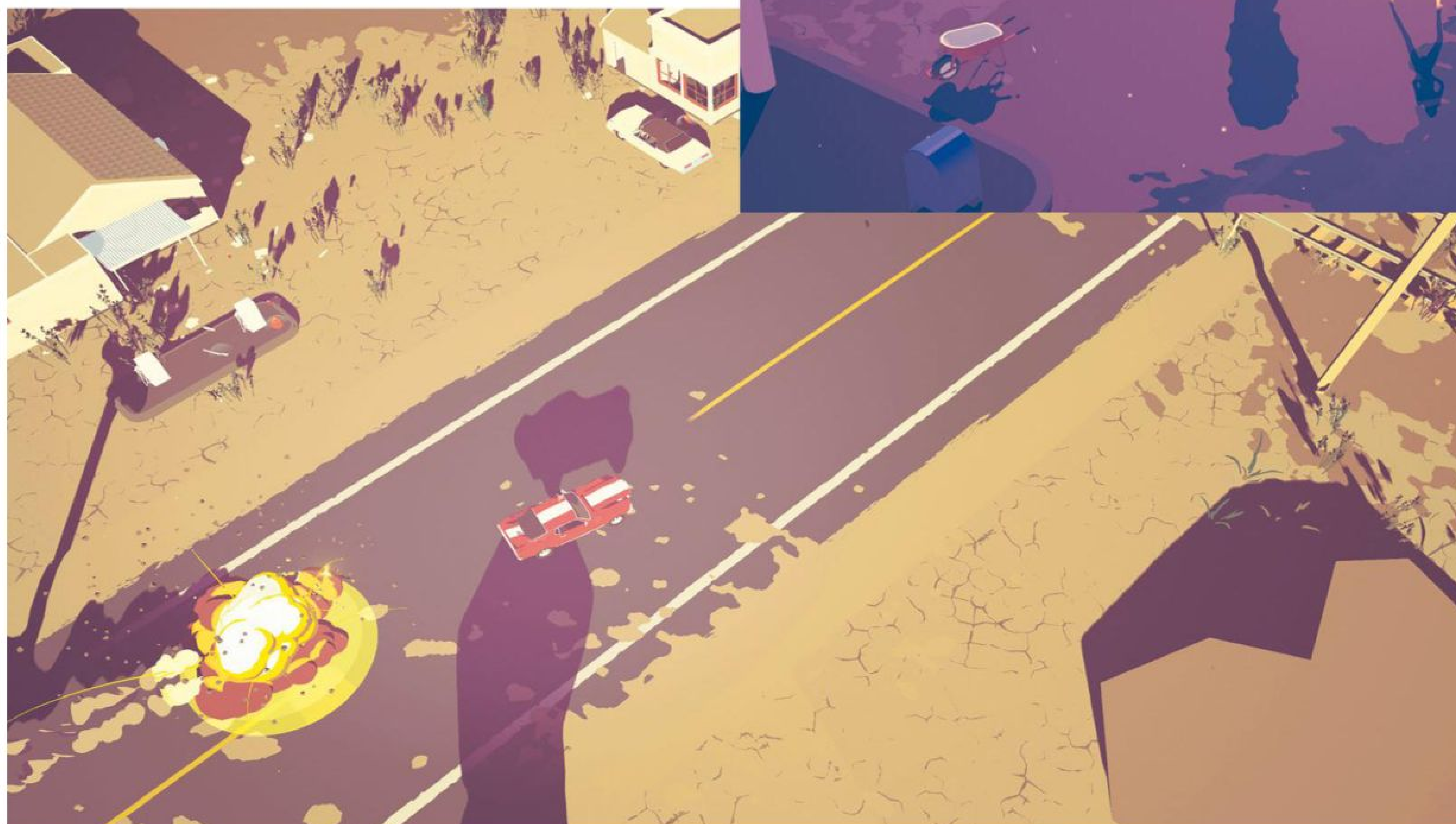


Spirit level

Not all the threats you'll face are corporeal – a few stops are quite literally ghost towns. Boarding up doors and windows is a waste of time when the enemies are coming through the walls, but fortunately there's another way to deal with them. "You can get hold of different kinds of chalk and they have different effects – and they're all Cthulhu-themed," Blackney explains. That isn't to say that the results will always be beneficial – Blackney has taken cues from the first Roguelike he played, Sega's *ToeJam & Earl*, where opening presents produced unpredictable results until you'd identified them. "These chalky substances can create teleportation portals or barriers that stop ghosts from getting through," he grins. "They can also open up a portal to hell and a creature will crawl out."



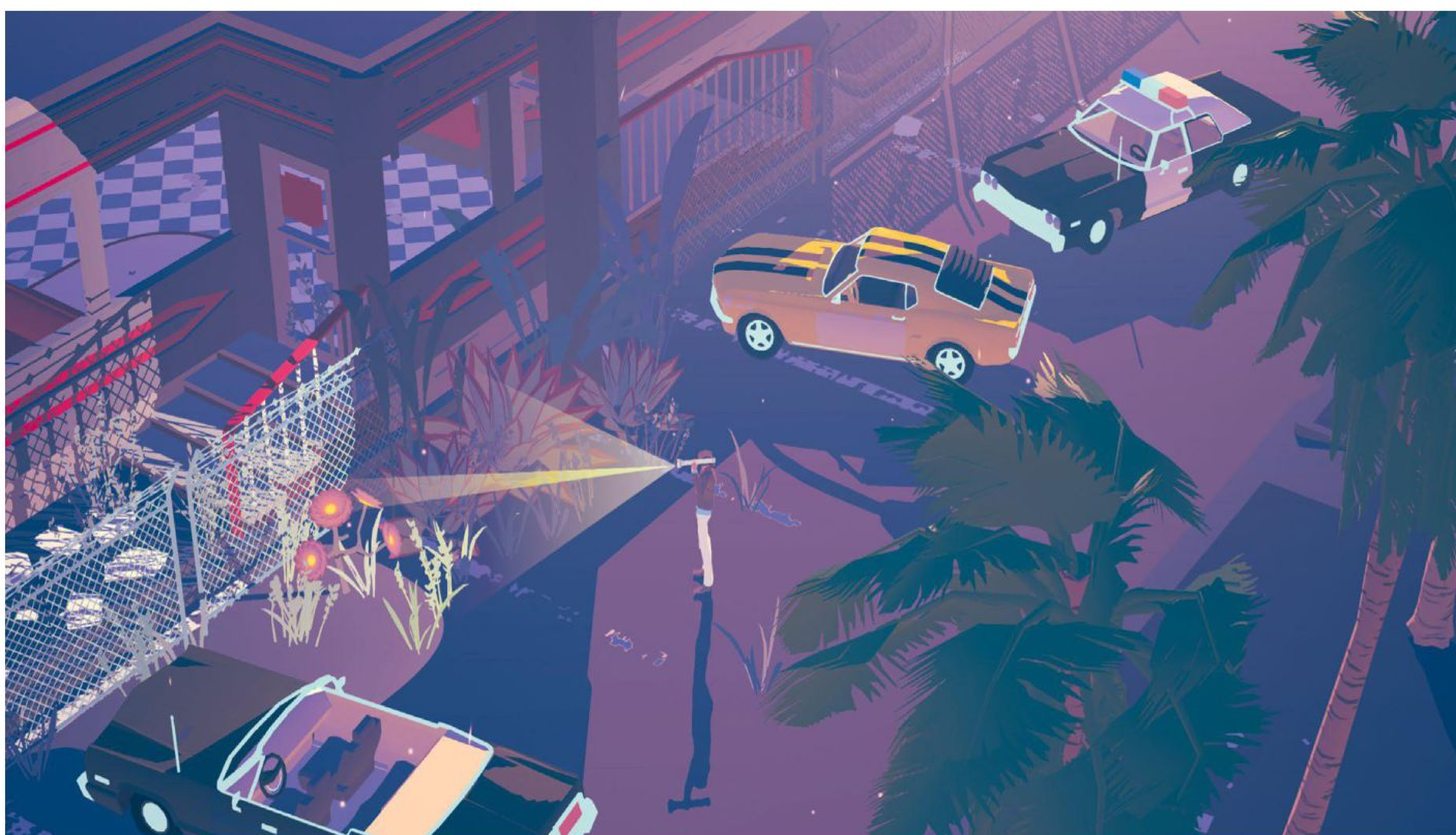






TOP **You don't have much storage space in your pockets, but you can stow extra gear in the trunk of your vehicle. If it's wrecked, anything in there is lost, so it pays to make sure the coast is clear before you set off.**
ABOVE **While there are procedural elements, much of *Dead Static Drive* is authored: scripted encounters will happen in certain locations at specific times**

TOP **A small but crucial detail: you'll need to approach the right side of your vehicle to get in. And by the right side, we mean the left side: this is America, after all.**
MAIN **Rather than steadily depleting meters, your character's condition is represented by flavour text. "Need to find a restroom" means it's time to take a leak. Three cups of coffee are just enough to make "Tired, could do with a perk up" disappear.**
RIGHT **You can sleep in your car, but it's risky. You might, Blackney says, wake up with someone standing over you holding a sledgehammer – though that may simply mean you're having a nightmare. "I want to have the player constantly on their toes, so they feel like they're never really safe"**



Developer ThroughLine Games
Publisher Square Enix
Format PC
Origin Denmark
Release 2018





FORGOTTON ANNE

(Subs, please check)

Given how regularly it likes to revisit its glory days, it's little wonder Square Enix is keen on games that deal with the subject of memory. Recently, it's been focused on things left behind – though we're not talking about the *Secret Of Mana* and *Chrono Trigger* remakes (and really, the less said about those the better). It's only a few short months since *Lost Sphear* suggested that neglected towns and villages could simply vanish to nothing, physically blotted out of existence as people's memories of them fade. This 2D adventure from Copenhagen-based ThroughLine Games has a gentler alternative: mislaid items blink out of sight and reappear in a different world, gaining sentience and taking jobs among a community of megaphones and petrol pumps, discarded socks and abandoned suitcases. After a few hours of play, alas, we've not yet encountered Square's spellchecker.

All is not well in this world, however. Some of these Forgotlings have formed a rebellion, and the city is under attack, with power outages and explosions creating a panic among those who just want to get their ticket punched so they can be reunited with their former owners. As one of two humans charged with maintaining order, the eponymous Anne must investigate; when one Forgotling breaks into her watchtower, she's given the option to 'distill' them, draining their life force – or Anima, as the game would have it – with a wrist-mounted device called the Arca. "This outcome could have been different", you're told – and yet, intriguingly, the game presents it as the most logical option. Later, upon finding another rebel, you're asked to extract information from them by any means necessary: as she takes them to the brink of distillation before they spill the beans, it's clear Anne's job title, The Enforcer, is well earned. By any other name, this is torture, and we're left feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

To get there, however, you'll have to use the Arca in a very different way. Anima is also the world's main energy source, and you'll need to harness it across a series of puzzles that start gently and quickly become more involved. The Arca can only hold enough Anima to activate a single device, and will require a refill from another before it can be used again. An Animavision mode filters out everything apart from power lines and cylinders, highlighting them in glowing blue, and allowing you to divert Anima at junctions as well as turning things on or off. A further complicating factor comes in the form of mechanised wings, with which Anne can reach higher platforms, albeit only when the Arca is fully juiced.

Occasionally, this feels a little too much like busywork: obstacles for the sake of obstacles, designed to temporarily prevent you from advancing the plot so you don't reach the end too quickly. But other challenges are more engaging, and all the more satisfying to solve for the absence of handholding. Some benefit from the narrative context or presentation: though it seems there's no time limit to stopping a runaway train, the soundtrack and visuals lend it a sense of urgency that means it's a relief when you find the right solution.

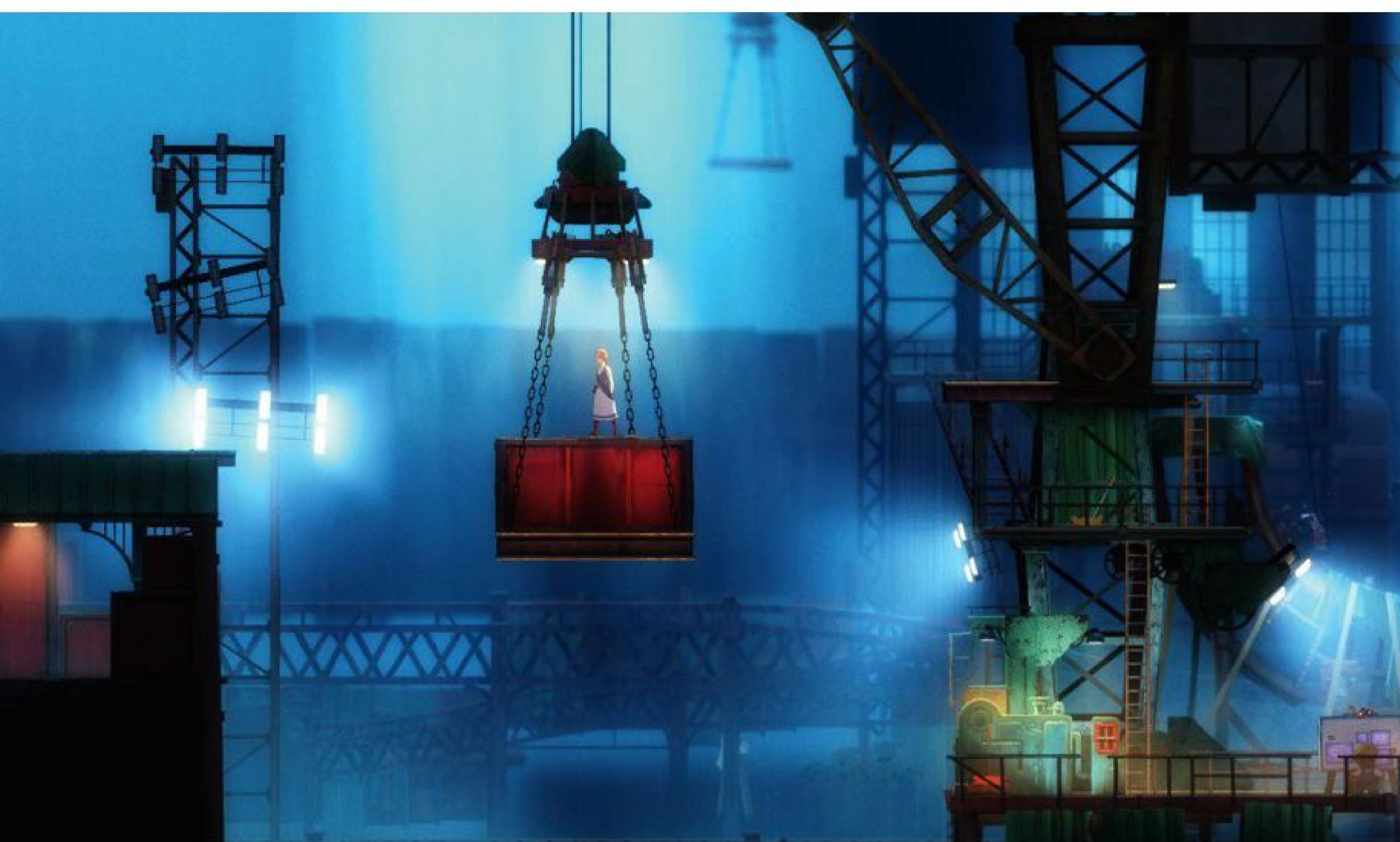
It's a delightful moment when someone called Tiphany is revealed to be a friendly lamp

Indeed, it almost goes without saying that this is an exceptionally pretty game: though a few close-ups disappoint, the hand-drawn art and animation is otherwise impeccable, combining a Studio Ghibli-esque warmth with the darkness – in both visuals and tone – of vintage Don Bluth. Yet there's a lightness of touch, too, particularly in your interactions with the other Forgotlings: when an early quest sends you out to meet someone called Tiphany, it's a delightful moment when she's revealed to be a friendly lamp. Though a few questions remain over its platforming (see 'Jumping lacks flash'), this is one world in which we're looking forward to getting lost. ■



Jumping lacks flash

There are pros and cons to ThroughLine Games' use of hand-crafted animation: though Anne's a joy to watch, she can feel a little heavy under the thumbs. In practice, she handles not dissimilarly to Conrad B Hart from Paul Cuisset's original *Flashback*. Anne's wings complicate things: when they're unfurled, she can jump much higher, but sometimes she'll inexplicably fail to latch onto platforms. Often, even if the distance seems too great, you'll find a regular leap will suffice: the canned animation will kick in and she'll grab hold of the edge, from where she can pull herself up. It's a minor issue given the lack of pressure, but here's hoping the puzzles and narrative remain the focus rather than the platforming.



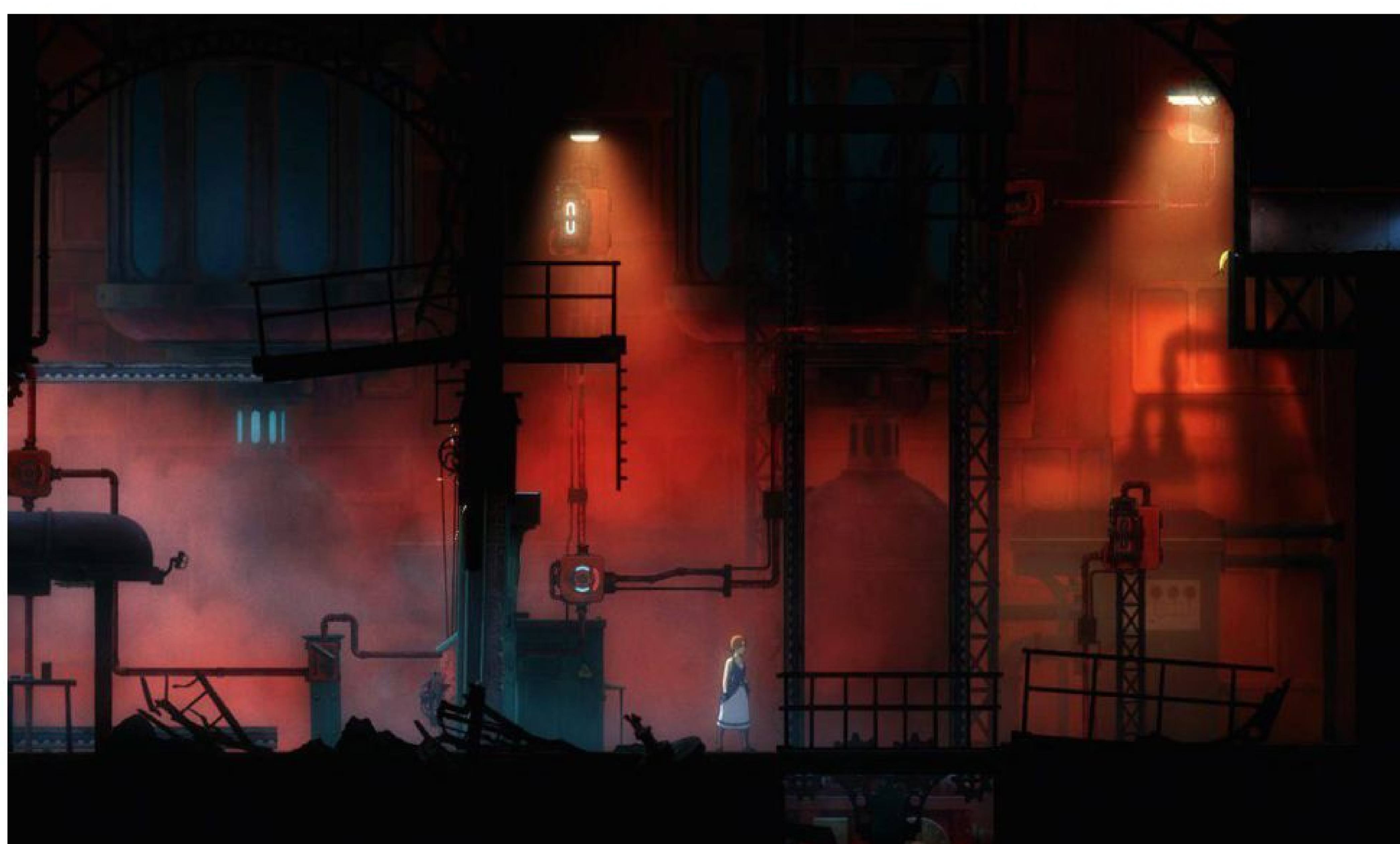






TOP **Ah, that old chestnut. This is hardly the first crane we've ever operated to move a crate to cross a gap, but the puzzle is more involved than it looks.**
ABOVE **The camera zooms out during puzzle and platforming sequences, but tends to get as close as it possibly can otherwise – well, when your game looks like this, why not?**
MAIN **Hidden areas reward careful explorers not with trinkets (so far, at least) but narrative bonuses. Anima brings a forgotten training dummy back to some semblance of life. Another room allows Anne to sit and collect her thoughts**





TOP **There's a certain ceremony to obtaining Anne's wings that suggests they're a bit more than a simple jump-enhancer. Hopefully she'll get to take flight for longer later on.**
LEFT **There's a sharp contrast between light and dark that makes the world feel threatening, even with such cartoonish inhabitants. Sometimes you'll want to switch to Animavision just to make sure you're not missing anything**



Developer Supergonk
Publisher Rising Star Games
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Origin UK
Release Spring



TRAILBLAZERS

Splatoon meets F-Zero in a new team-based racer

Six years ago, on the run-up to Wii U's launch, Shigeru Miyamoto was asked why Nintendo hadn't released an *F-Zero* game since 2004. "Since the first episode on SNES, many games have been made but the series has evolved very little. I thought people had grown weary of it," he replied before asking in return, "Why *F-Zero*? What do you want that we haven't done before?" With no *F-Zero* on the horizon still, we finally might have an answer in the form of *Trailblazers*.

Trailblazers is a team-based racing game which rides on a strong gimmick: a painting mechanic straight from *De Blob* and *Splatoon*. You have a recharging stock of paint with which you can paint a trail behind you as you race. If your teammates then drive on the paint, they'll automatically boost, and the longer they're on it, the faster they'll go. But if you're painting, you can't boost, and your stock of pigment only lasts a few seconds and takes time to recharge. What's more, it has a secondary use: you can fire off your entire supply at a racer ahead to send them spinning from the track.

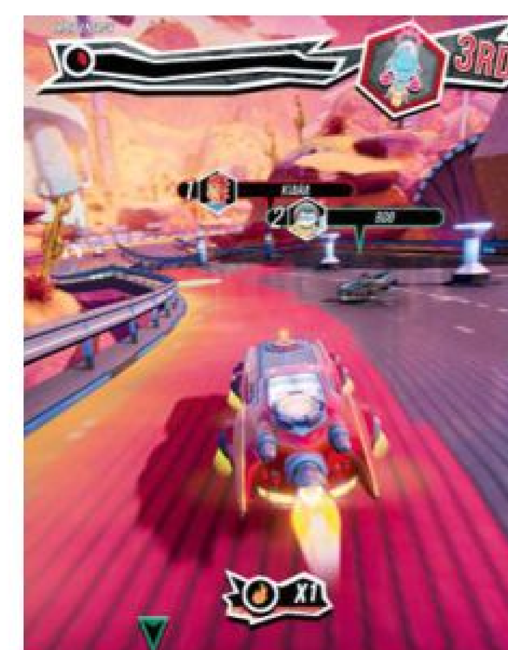
Coordination, written in vibrant colours on the track, is the name of the game

Thus, as you speed around *Trailblazers'* courses you'll always have much more than just holding the racing line on your mind. Paint now and boost later? Disrupt the other team's painted trail with your own to deny them their boost? Let a boosting competitor overtake and then shoot them in the back? Whatever the strategy, coordination, written in vibrant colours on the track, is the name of the game.

It's a little easy to get carried away with *Trailblazers'* similarities to *Splatoon*, since *Splatoon* is a game about territory control. By contrast, every player has to go around the track in *Trailblazers*, so painting in it isn't so much about claiming the track as careful timing and precision driving. In fact, it's better to think of it in the context of another creative source, since its lead designer, **Ben Ward**, is a veteran of Bizarre Creations. "I've always had a few ideas for interesting racing mechanics, but it goes back to Martyn Chudley, who ran Bizarre," Ward says. "Martyn invented Kudos, and that layer of point-scoring over the top of a more normal racing mechanic, I found that amazing." Kudos, a system introduced in Dreamcast exclusive *Metropolis Street Racer* and which later defined the *Project Gotham* series, awarded points for stylish play, transfiguring street racing into something altogether spicier.

In many ways, *Trailblazers* is an attempt to re-inject Bizarre-era ideas into a genre that's become pretty staid, dominated by the conventions of *Gran Turismo*, *Forza* and *Need For Speed*. "Line up some screenshots and they look pretty much the same," says Ward. "It's a long way from the games I enjoyed while growing up." Rather than look to them, he instead watched where popular innovation has been happening in the FPS world, noticing the rise of team-based games such as *Overwatch*. "You look at the racing genre and nothing like that has happened, and that's a shame."

Trailblazers' painting mechanic is therefore best seen as part of a wider attempt to incorporate three-versus-three team-based multiplayer in a racing game. It bends many racing conventions to support it, such as its scoring system. Giving the trophy to the player who crossed the finishing line first doesn't really work for team-based play, so instead, *Trailblazers* awards points to the player who came first in each lap to support consistent performance, as well as for painting areas of the track, boosting effectively, and shooting the other team. With coherent and thoughtful design like this, it's tempting to believe that beyond its flashy looks and taglines, *Trailblazers* really could form a new racing classic. ■



Console and back again

Ben Ward has ridden waves of change in the game industry, starting with large-studio console-game dev at Liverpool's Bizarre Creations. After it was closed by Activision in 2011, Ward co-founded Hogrocket to capitalise on the fast growth of gaming on iOS with fellow Bizarre alumni Peter Collier and *Geometry Wars* designer Stephen Cakebread, but it folded after releasing debut *Tiny Invaders*, partly because the market for imaginative arcade games was drying up amid a glut of free-to-play match-three releases. Ward then founded Supergonk, finding success with such quiz games as *Worldly*, but found that even as his daily user counts were rising, revenue was falling. "Mobile is becoming less viable for small teams," he says. He began to see it was time to return to consoles with *Trailblazers*.







TOP **In true arcade-racer fashion, you'll choose from a colourful set of characters to race as.**
ABOVE **The soundtrack is apparently inspired by *Jet Set Radio*. "It's the greatest," Ward says. He's right, too.**
MAIN **A story mode features objective-based racing challenges along with a "light-touch narrative"**

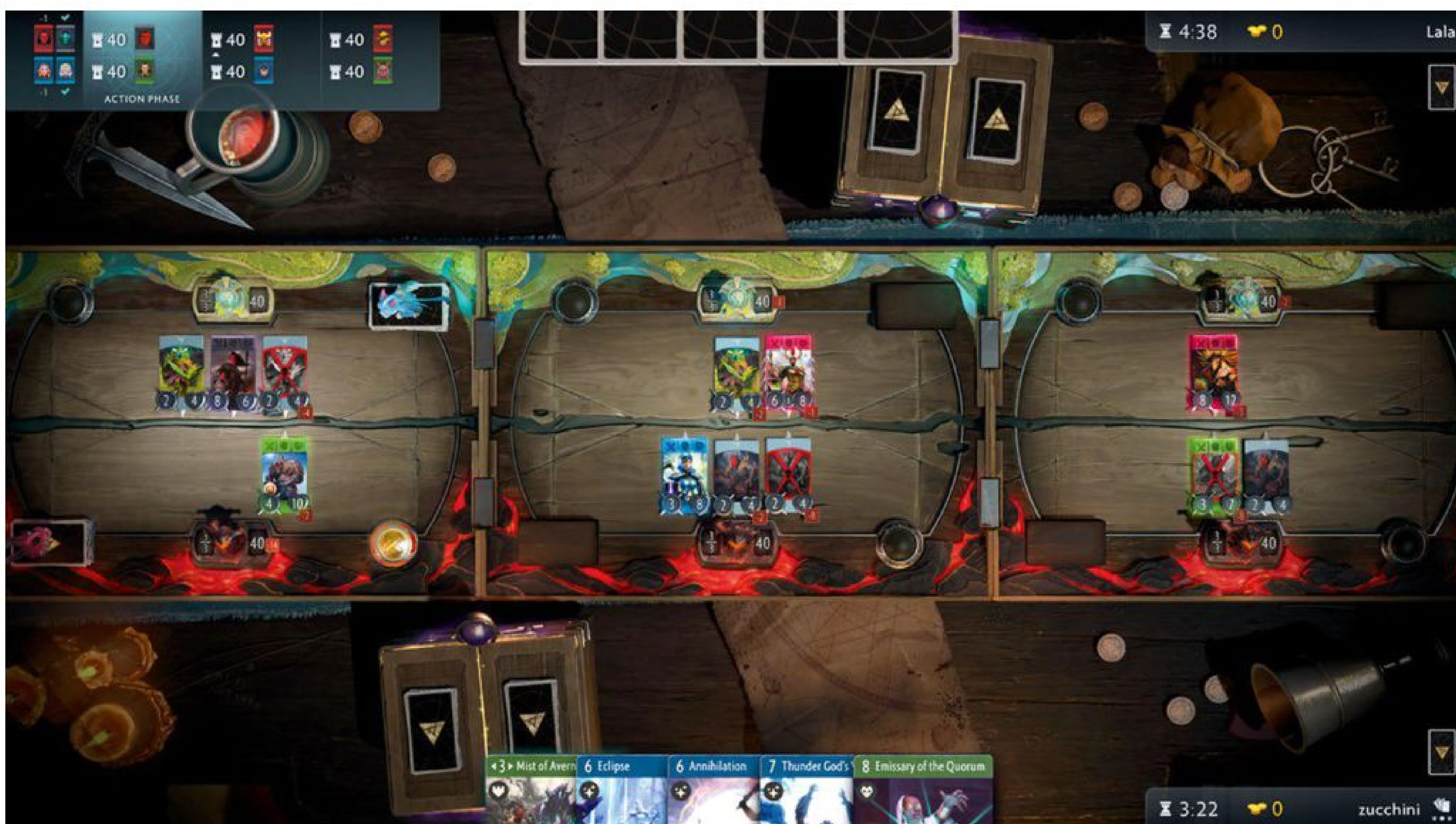




TOP **Designed primarily for online multiplayer, *Trailblazers* includes a *Mario Kart 8*-style splitscreen mode for couch-based online teamwork.**
LEFT ***Trailblazers* has taken three years to make, with only two fulltime developers**

ARTIFACT

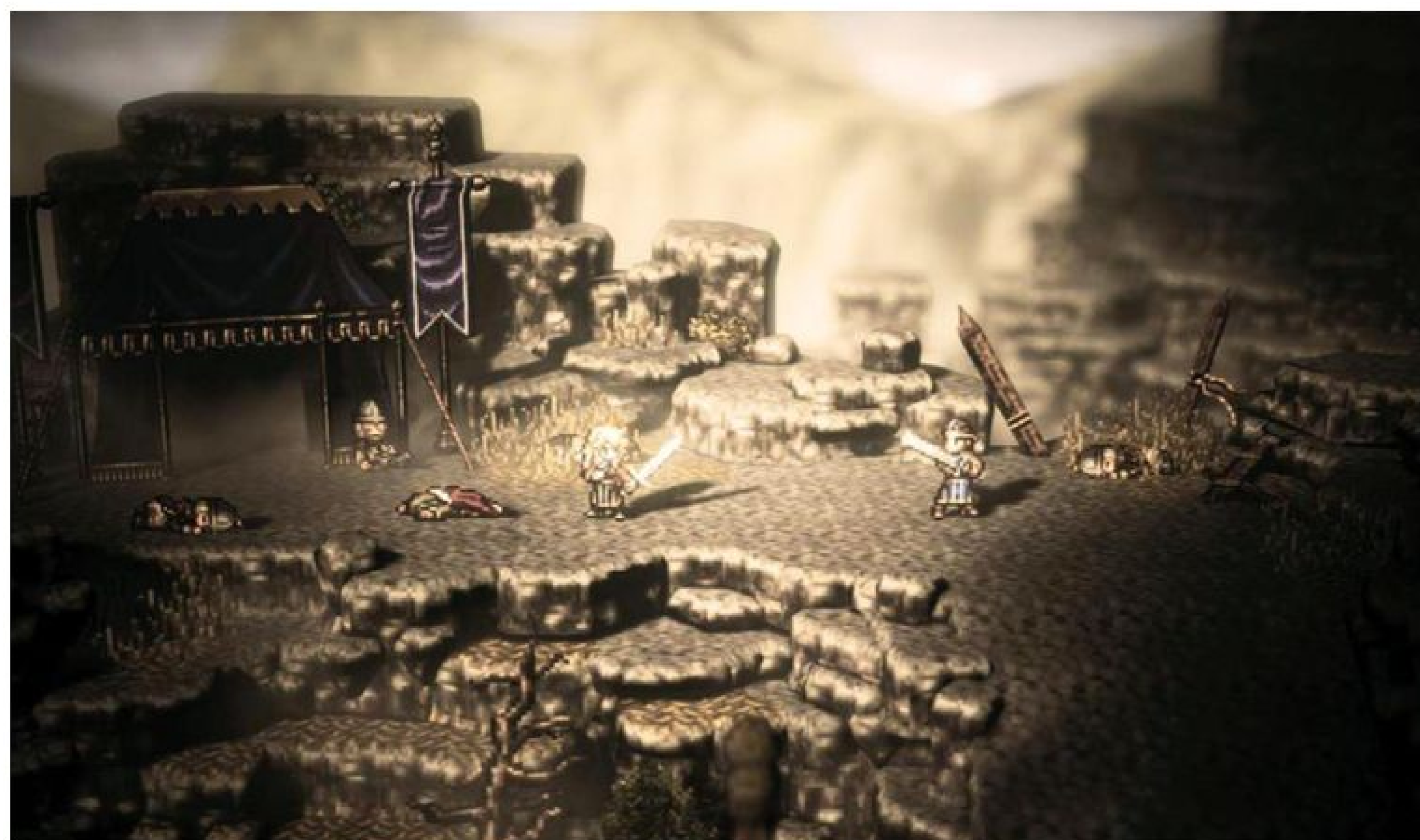
Developer/publisher Valve **Format** Android, iOS, PC **Origin** US **Release** 2018 (PC), 2019 (Android, iOS)



Valve's *Dota*-themed card game may have been the subject of legendary derision when announced at The International last year, but its recent full unveiling went over much better. Split, in the *Dota 2* style, across three lanes, *Artifact* is perhaps best thought of as being like playing three games of *Hearthstone* at once. Many of *Dota*'s heroes are here, and in an appropriate twist on the standard CCG, fallen cards aren't gone for good, but can be used again after a round on the sidelines. With Richard Garfield, legendary creator of *Magic: The Gathering*, leading the way, suddenly all that booing seems a bit misguided. Still funny, though.

OCTOPATH TRAVELER

Developer/publisher Square Enix **Format** Switch **Origin** Japan **Release** July 13



The latest in a long, long line of nostalgia-fuelled Square Enix JRPGs now has both a final name and a release date, though while we're in no way inclined to complain about the latter, we'd hoped for a rather snappier title from a game previously known as *Project Octopath Traveler*. Still, it's a handsome thing, with some fine ideas, such as the tweak to the timeworn JRPG job system that lets party members assume multiple roles in battle.

MARIO TENNIS ACES

Developer Camelot **Publisher** Nintendo
Format Switch **Origin** Japan **Release** June 22



On first inspection, Camelot's latest looks a little too gimmicky – super moves that let you line up shots with absolute precision; time-slowing abilities that let you make impossible returns – but a Classic mode strips all that away. A bonkers-looking story mode means this still seems weirdly essential.

DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

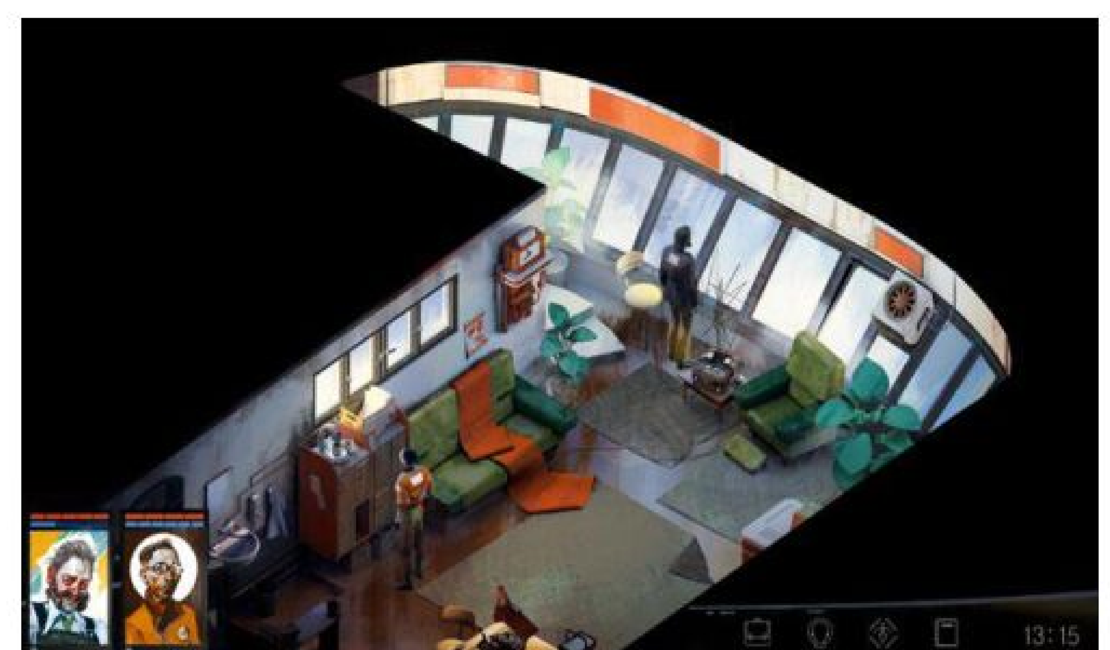
Developer Quantic Dream **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4 **Origin** France **Release** May 25



After hitting the headlines for all the wrong reasons, David Cage's Quantic Dream is finally gearing up for the release of a game that feels like it's been floating around forever. While it's all too easy to be cynical about his output, Cage's games are always worth playing – and good for a laugh too.

DISCO ELYSIUM

Developer Zaum Studio **Publisher** Humble Bundle
Format PC **Origin** Estonia, UK **Release** 2018



Previously known as *No Truce With The Furies*, this cop thriller was originally due last year, but its lofty ambitions prompted a delay and a rather grabbier new name. Your character's clothing, and innermost thoughts and fears, are more important than their skills in combat; strange, intriguing stuff.

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#318

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY















Promised land

How one of Japan's most revered videogames is setting its sights on western success ▸

By Nathan Brown





On February 10, 1988, **Yuji Horii** jumped on his bike. He was heading to his local game store, because a title he'd made, *Dragon Quest III*, was launching that day. "That was the moment, when I saw the queue. That was when I first felt we had something big on our hands."

He wasn't wrong: that day is now the stuff of videogame legend. A million copies sold in a single day. Almost 400 Japanese schoolchildren arrested for truancy in what the National Police Agency would later call a "national disgrace". Publisher Square Enix had to promise the government that it would only release future series instalments on public holidays or weekends.

That promise has held firm, largely, for the last 30 years – *Dragon Quest XI* launched in Japan on July 29, 2017, a Saturday. For three decades this series has been a national treasure, every release comfortably passing a million sales in its home country. When, in 2006, Famitsu readers voted on their favourite games of all time, there were three *Dragon Quest* games in the top 10, and six in the top 20. The series' appeal has grown and endured across the generations, both of gaming hardware and Japan itself – parents passing on their love of the game to their children, and them to theirs. *DQXI* sold over two million units in Japan in its first two days on sale.

It is one of Japan's most famous, most revered and best-selling series. The Slime, a recurring enemy in the games since the first instalment, is every bit as iconic in Japan as Mario or Link. Yet despite all that, the *Dragon Quest* series has never found much of a foothold in the west. Horii believes that, after 30 years and over 70 million copies sold, that might be about to change – and that *Dragon Quest XI* is the game to make it happen.

> Parents have passed on their love of the game to their children. DQXI sold over two million units in Japan in its first two days

To do that, *Dragon Quest XI* itself has had to change, with Square Enix using the fifteen-or-so months between the Japanese and western release dates to better tailor the game to a western audience. "The last *Dragon Quest* game that was a big success in the west was *Dragon Quest VIII*," executive producer Yu Miyake tells us (the game, an **Edge** 8, launched in the US for PS2 in 2005 and sold half-a-million copies, a series record for the region). "The way it was localised, the translation and the voices, were very well received. We're thinking that's the baseline now, and everything we do for *XI* is going to be at least of that quality." ▶



Game *Dragon Quest XI*
Developer/publisher Square Enix
Format PC, PS4
Release Autumn





ABOVE All is well as our hero leaves his home village to head to the first city and, within it, the palace. **LEFT** And all seems fine at first in the throne room – but once they learn of your power, you're swiftly locked up. **MAIN** The Great Tree Of Life is the source of all the world's life, and gives the hero his power

Arriving at the first city gives an opportunity to pick up sidequests. Early on, don't expect much of a challenge; one quest to find a lost cat will be even easier using the western release's firstperson mode

Cafe culture

Western PR teams are slowly cottoning on to the marketing value of tie-in businesses, but when we do see them, they're little pop-ups – such as the temporary London spitroast to promote *Monster Hunter: World*. *Dragon Quest*, however, has a permanent home. Luida's Bar, in Tokyo's Roppongi district, spans two floors and offers up a host of appropriate treats. The obvious choice is a steamed bun in the shape of a Slime, but there are also boss-referencing sushi dishes, themed curries and a host of cocktails styled like potions from the game. Envisaged as a meeting place for fans of the series, it's shown surprising staying power, attracting the same varied clientele as the game itself. And no, you absolutely may not see the photo of us being overwhelmed by a dozen-strong army of Slime plushes.







So it proves in our demo at Square Enix's Tokyo HQ. Within seconds, in fact, as an NPC moves their lips and *actual words* come out. Part of the reason for *Dragon Quest*'s enduring, generation-spanning appeal in Japan is that it doesn't change that much; that anyone who played a *Dragon Quest* game 30 years ago can settle down in front of the latest release and feel immediately at home. To that end, the Japanese games are silent, even in cutscenes, telling their beloved stories entirely through text.

That wouldn't do in the west, of course, and as such many of the characters in the western version of *Dragon Quest XI* are fully voiced. Out in the sticks, where our hero begins his journey, they're west country yokels. The palace guards in the nearby city are slightly more refined; inside, royals and noblemen speak as you'd expect. The only exception to this rule is the hero himself – who, Horii believes, simply has to remain silent. "One real core thing about *Dragon Quest* is how the player *is* the main character; they play that role. That's why the main heroes in *Dragon Quest* games never speak. It's very rare to see a game where the story is told with such depth, and breadth, without a speaking protagonist. That's something I think people are going to react to very positively."

That's part of the reason for the delay. A year and a bit may not seem like much in the scheme of things – especially considering this series' history, spanning back as it does to a time when 12 months felt like a quick ▶



***Dragon Quest* series creator, writer and designer Yuji Horii**

"It's very rare to see a game where the story is told with such depth, and breadth, without a speaking protagonist"



LEFT You meet your first ally in prison. The inevitable escape features a rather ham-fisted stealth section, a dragon chase, and finally this leap of faith





ABOVE The opening cinematic shows the hero being found abandoned. This fellow takes him in.
RIGHT Years later, he prays to The Great Tree Of Life with his childhood friend and love interest







It's here, in your home village, that you first realise that this is no true open world. A villager at the gates prevents you from leaving until a certain point

turnaround for a Japanese game's localisation – but in an era where players have grown accustomed to simultaneous worldwide releases, it feels like quite a wait. The team puts much of that down to the fact that it was polishing the story until the 11th hour, and couldn't begin translation of the game's 2.3 million-word script until development was pretty much complete. But Square Enix has been thinking about how it might better shape a *Dragon Quest* game for the west – including, early on, considering making the series' first ever open world.



Executive producer Yu Miyake

Horii's strict control over the pace and meter of storytelling was the driving factor behind that idea being abandoned, though another major consideration was the stress it would put on the team. "If you're going for a completely open world, there's obviously a development cost attached to that, affecting where you spend your time and effort," Horii says. "If you want to be able to, for example, go fishing somewhere, you've got to put a lot of effort into developing a fishing system. I felt that, rather than spread our efforts across a breadth of things, we'd rather concentrate everything on the story. I felt that was a much better use of our time."

That's not to say, however, that *Dragon Quest XI* is a small game. Nor is it entirely linear. Rather, it's a series of towns, cities and small settlements linked together by open, explorable areas dotted with campsites and quest-givers, and strewn liberally with enemies. This

"I felt that, rather than spread our efforts across a breadth of things, we'd rather concentrate everything on the story"

is classic JRPG design – the town and the field – and it's certainly no match for the vast, lavish open-world expanses produced in the west. But there is charm to it, and beauty, its rolling, cartoonish hills the set dressing for what is comfortably the best-looking game the *Dragon Quest* team has yet produced.

Yet despite the contemporary sheen, at its core *Dragon Quest XI* is traditional to a fault. That's made immediately clear when the protagonist gets into his first fight, after straying into the aggro range of a Slime in the field. This is menu-driven, turn-based combat in the most classic of styles, and while a glimpse at some encounters later in the game shows that the spectacle ramps up somewhat as you grow more powerful, *DQXI*'s battles are fundamentally driven by the same system – attack, cast, defend, flee – that powered JRPGs decades ago. This reveals the key question about *Dragon Quest XI* and, in a wider context, suggests why a series of such constant success in its home nation has traditionally struggled overseas. How do you ▶

— how *can* you — bring about meaningful innovation in a series whose success and longevity is driven, in such large part, by its familiarity? More bluntly: how do you take something that people love for being old, and make it feel new?

"I always say it like this, but we don't change the basic grammar; we change the content," Horii says. "The idea is that you'll be able to understand the game and pick up everything really quickly without reading a manual or tutorial. That's a constant feature of the game. Every one is made like that."

The *Dragon Quest* lineage serves as proof of that concept. The game might be essentially the same from one instalment to the next, but its method of delivery changes. *DQVIII* was a PS2 game, *IX* a DS release, and *X* a PC MMO. In Japan, the pan-generational appeal of the series led to

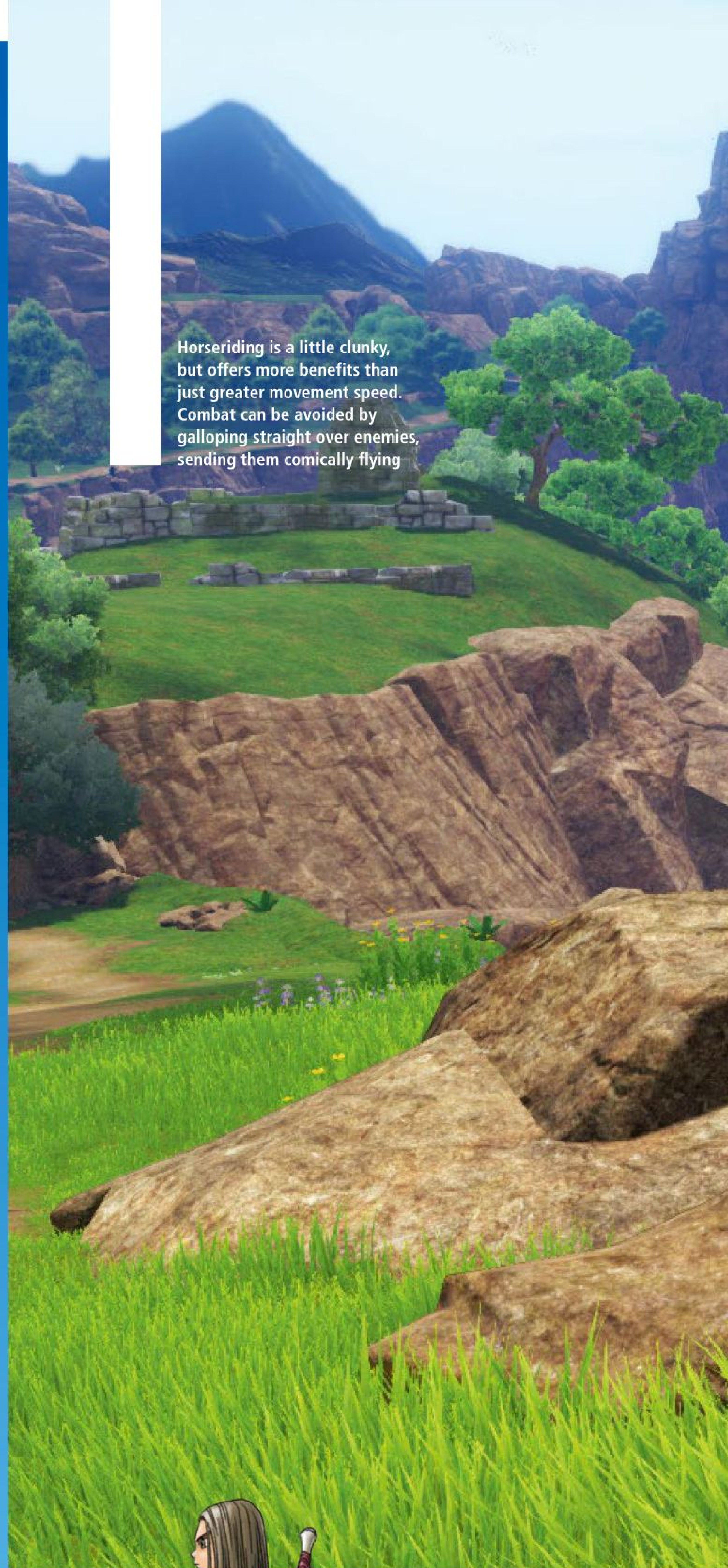
> "The idea is that you'll be able to understand the game and pick up everything really quickly without reading a manual or tutorial"

the creation of, effectively, two *DQXI*s instead of one. Both the PS4 and 3DS versions told the same story, but their method of delivery was different, each laser targeted at different demographics.

"As a series that's been running for over 30 years, *Dragon Quest* has a lot of different fans," Miyake says. "They've all got their own preferences and things they want to see. You've got people who'll say, 'I really like the old, traditional 2D *Dragon Quest*'. Then you've got people who want to play in 3D with really beautiful, good-quality graphics. By having the game on these different kinds of hardware we can satisfy all these people and their different needs."

That was a decision that made good business sense in Japan, where both Sony's console and Nintendo's handheld have been tremendous successes. But the story in the west is very different; PS4 may be the runaway market leader, but the ageing 3DS is on the wane and, even at its peak, was hardly a smash hit. As such the west will get the PS4 game this July and, day and date, a PC version.

That's sensible thinking in an era where Japanese companies are reaping considerable dividends from bringing their previously console-exclusive games to the likes of Steam, and a territory that lacks an audience with a penchant for the traditional to which Square Enix must cater in Japan. Long-standing western fans of the series may be comparatively few in number, but there's still plenty here for them in a game Horii describes as "a culmination" of the series to date. There's a certain ▶



Horseriding is a little clunky, but offers more benefits than just greater movement speed. Combat can be avoided by galloping straight over enemies, sending them comically flying





Quest log

Horii has dedicated almost his entire career to *Dragon Quest*, and its history runs in tandem with the growth of the industry as a whole. The first game was made by a team of fewer than ten in a handful of months; he and his staff have worked across hardware generations, ensuring each new game is up to modern spec. Naturally, he has his favourites. "The first was *Dragon Quest III*," he says. "We managed to get it done in a very short time, and it sold massively. *V* was another big achievement – we told the story of the whole life of a character, which is still very unique for a game. Then there's *XI*, which is a culmination of everything I've done in the *Dragon Quest* series. That we could bring it all together and create such a polished game, with a massive team, is a real achievement." It's not all been smooth sailing, of course – and Horii admits that *DQVII*, despite its success, is a personal point of regret: the game was delayed twice, something that has never been repeated since.



ABOVE The Great Tree Of Life, or Yggdrasil, was first introduced in *Dragon Quest II* and has been a series fixture ever since. Typically floating in mid-air and surrounded by intimidating enemies and environments, it's a late-game destination

contradiction here, albeit one that will be invisible to the audience Square Enix hopes to attract, in a game packed with nostalgic callbacks to earlier games in the series.

Yet that is, to an extent, unavoidable for the latest game in so beloved a series, that has such a cultural footprint. Horii estimates that some 90 per cent of Japanese men in their 30s have played a *Dragon Quest* game; now at parenting age, they are passing on that love to their offspring. "If you're talking about recognition, it's similar to the way you think about football in England," Miyake adds. "In Japan, pretty much everyone of primary school age, if they haven't played *Dragon Quest* themselves, they'll know someone who has – their siblings, or their parents. They know the name, certainly, and have contact with it.

"I think that shows how deeply it's permeated into Japanese awareness. That's the treasure of *Dragon Quest* as a series. It's not just stopped at a single point in time; it's continued to release, grow and evolve alongside new hardware. With every new generation, you get new people coming into it, and they continue to play it – you never really move away from *Dragon Quest*, even after many years. If you ask people what their favourite game in the series is, or their favourite moment, you'll get different answers from different generations."

That's certainly borne out in the development team, a blend of old hands and new staff that played the veterans' early work in their youth; producer Hokuto Okamoto, for instance, remembers being compelled to buy *Dragon Quest VII* by a TV ad showing people begging for the long-delayed PS1 game to finally come out. Team sizes have certainly grown, and development times extended, since Horii and a small crew knocked out the first *Dragon Quest* in a matter of months. Square Enix won't get specific, but we're told the *DQXI* team was roughly equivalent in number to that which made *Final Fantasy XV* – albeit needing significantly less time than the decade Hajime Tabata's sprawling game required.

The two series, once great rivals until Squaresoft and Enix merged, are seen as equals in Japan. *FFXV* has sold seven million copies worldwide, however, a target that even the most optimistic observer would think out of *DQXI*'s reach, despite the publisher's attempts to refine it for overseas tastes. It's strange, as a westerner, seeing just how popular *Dragon Quest* is in Japan: a merch store round the corner from Square Enix's Tokyo HQ has more than its fair share of *Final Fantasy* gear, naturally, but it's stuffed to the gills with *Dragon Quest* goods. The Slime is simply everywhere, fashioned into plushies, pencil cases, coffee tables and latte-art stencils. The Square Enix Cafe, nestled in prime real estate a few yards east of Akihabara station, is ostensibly celebrating the first anniversary of *Nier: Automata*'s release when we visit, yet again the Slime's nonthreatening gurn is inescapable. It is as guaranteed a presence in an Akihabara game or otaku-culture store as Mario, Link or Pikachu. The series even has its own permanent theme bar in Roppongi (see 'Cafe culture').

Dragon Quest has left an indelible cultural footprint across 30 years of Japanese history, and while structural and stylistic familiarity are key to that, the secret of its consistency is not the Slime, but the men behind it. It's Horii, the chief storyteller for 11 games spanning three decades. It's Akira Toriyama, the creator of *Dragon Ball* whose vibrant, cutesy character designs have become the *Dragon Quest* series' visual calling card. And it's Koichi Sugiyama, the elder statesman of Japanese game music, whose compositions are another hallmark.

Yet all are, to put it politely, knocking on a bit. Sugiyama, the eldest, is 86; we wonder how long Horii, by comparison a spritely 64, intends to carry on with his life's work. He won't be drawn on that – such is his importance to Square Enix that any hint at his retirement would send the publisher's share price plummeting. But Miyake finds the notion of a *Dragon Quest* game without Horii and his fellow stalwarts unthinkable. "As far as we're concerned, *Dragon Quest* is something made by Yuji Horii, Akira Toriyama and Koichi Sugiyama. If those three weren't involved in the project, there'd be no point in making it. We'd make something else."

> "In Japan, pretty much everyone of primary school age, if they haven't played Dragon Quest themselves, they'll know someone who has"

Horii, now 64, couldn't ride his bike to a Sofmap or BIC Camera on a new *Dragon Quest* game's launch day. He'd be mobbed. We meet him and the team in his office, whose location, Square Enix staff inform us on the approach, we are forbidden to even hint at. Tucked away in a plush apartment building with views across Tokyo and decked out in mock-medieval regalia, with axes and swords hanging on the walls, it'd be a culture shock even without the heavy jetlag haze, the old butting up jarringly against the new.

But this is Japan in microcosm – a country deeply rooted in tradition, forever racing into the future – and it is *Dragon Quest* in a nutshell, too. A game that moves steadily forward without ever really changing its ways, growing in fame and reach all the time, its sales figures stretching upwards into the skies. Will it finally take off in the west? Perhaps, though the odds are certainly stacked against it. It remains, as it ever was, a curio, a brand-new game with an umistakable fusty air. To the Japanese – whether they've been playing it all their lives, or only recently found out about it on the playground – it doesn't matter. For as long as Horii and co stick around, it will be something to be treasured. ■

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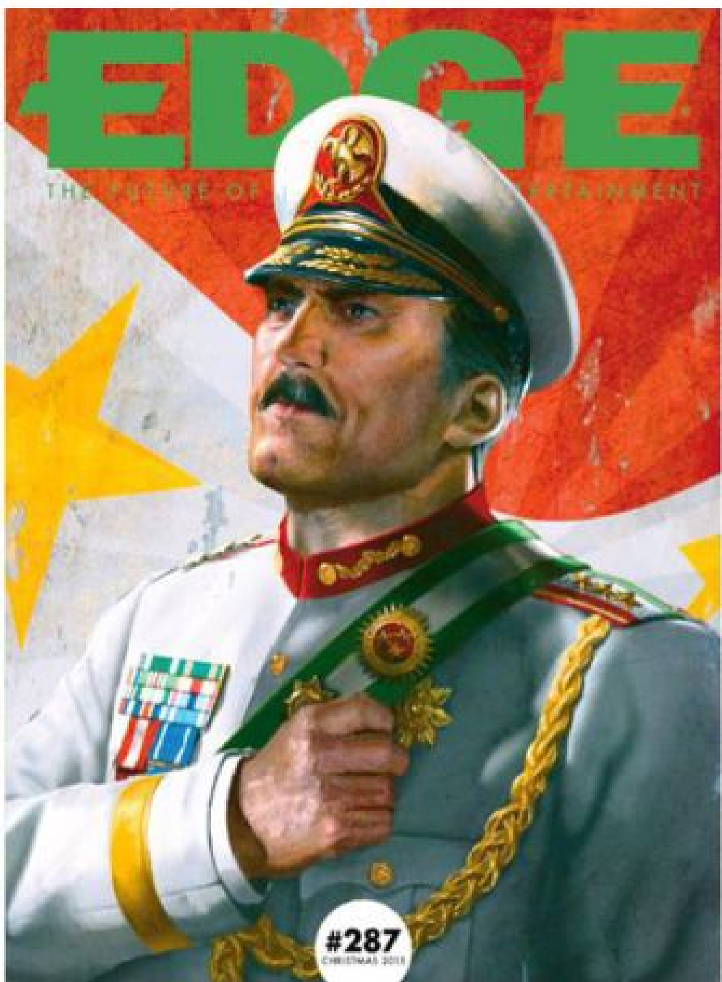
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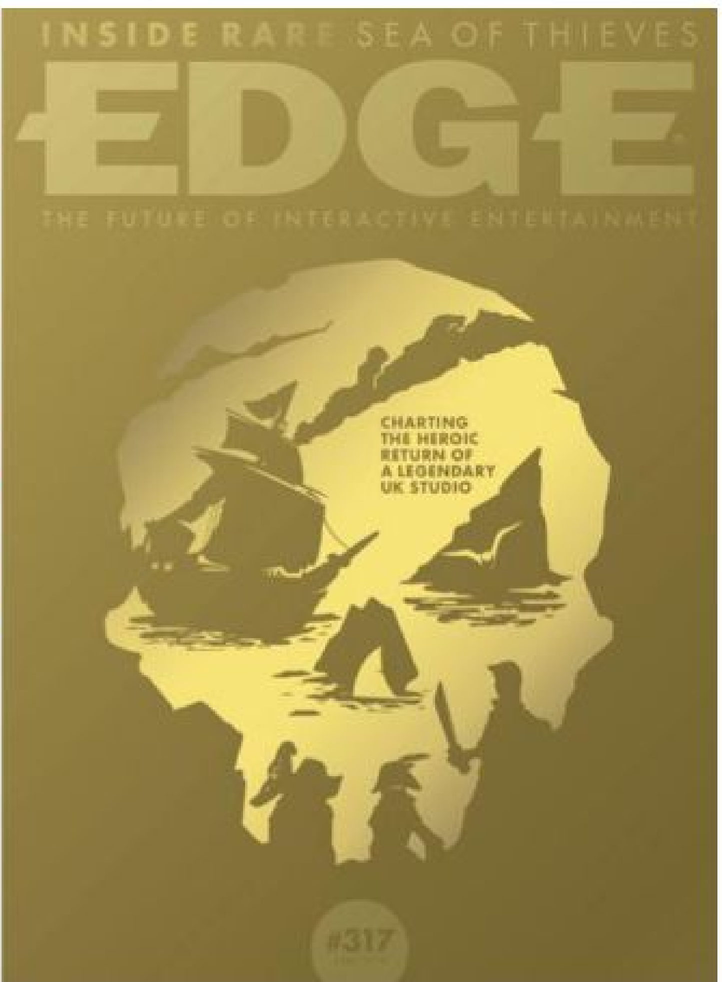
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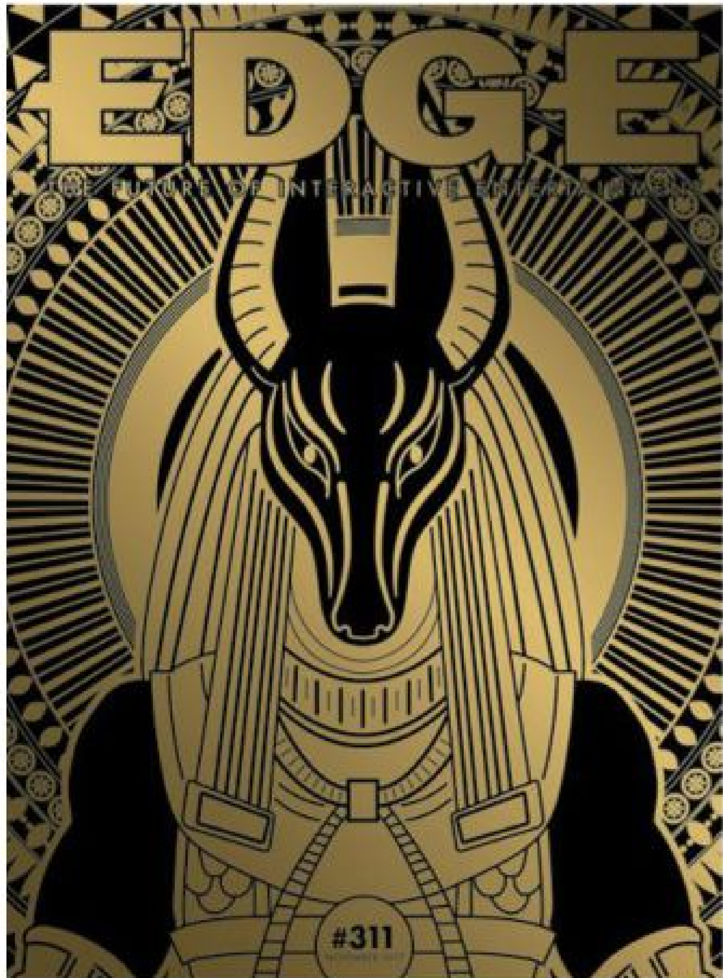
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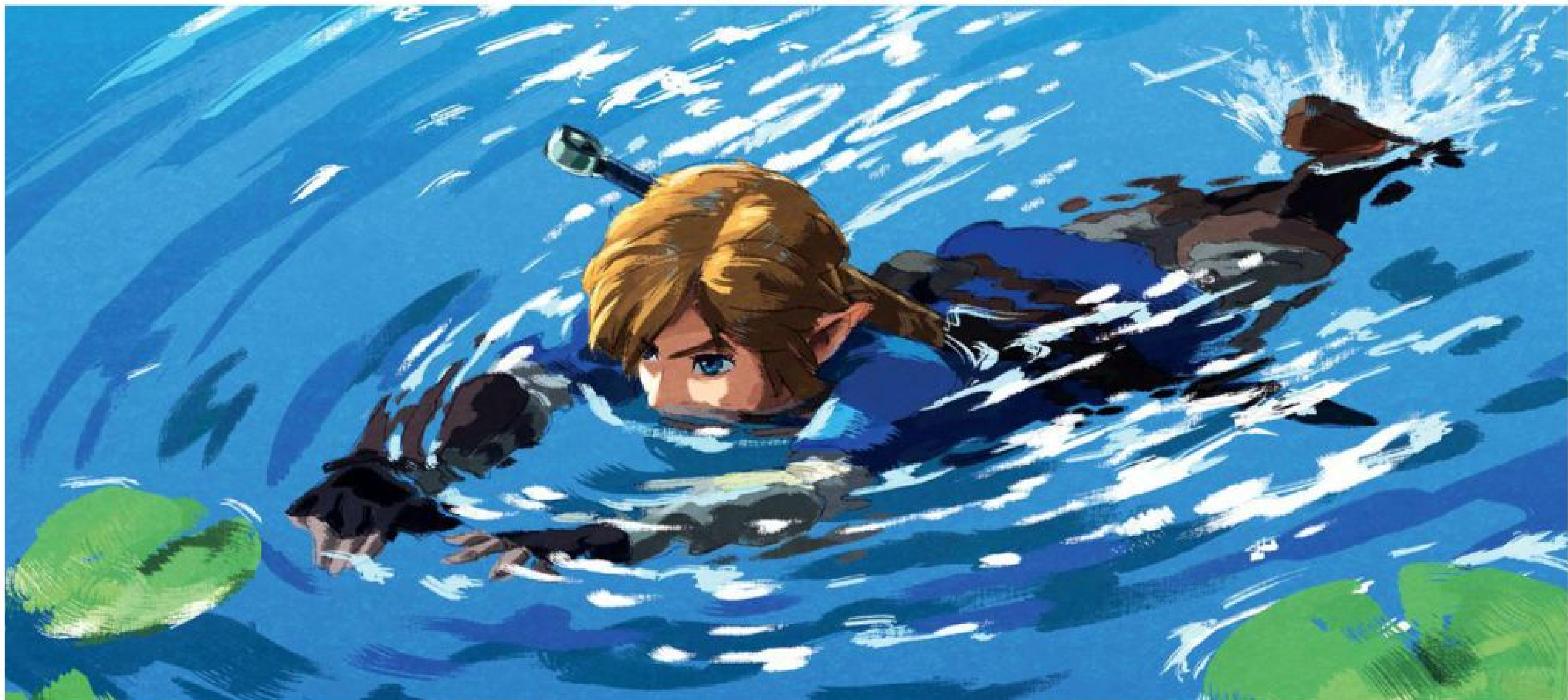
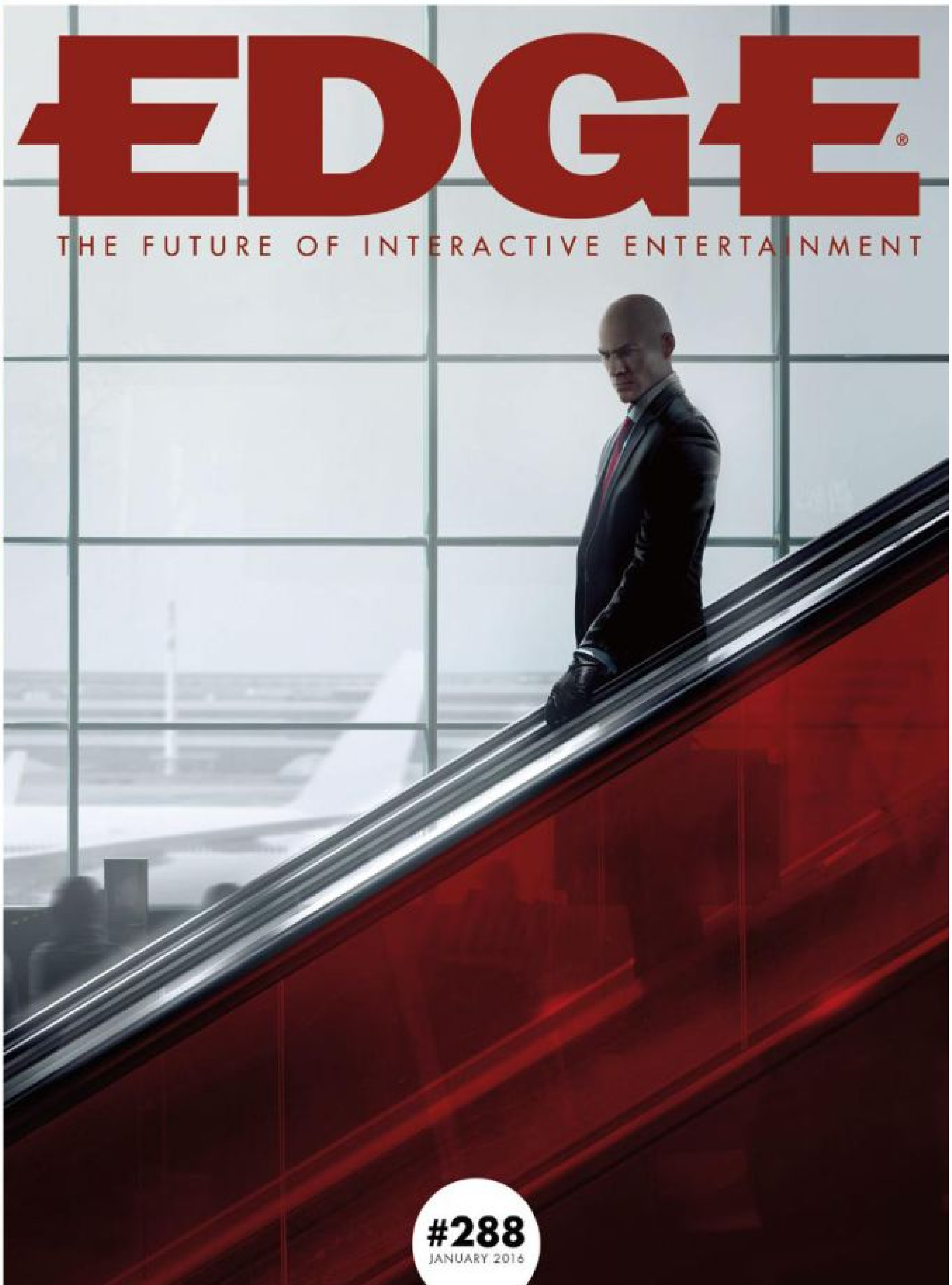


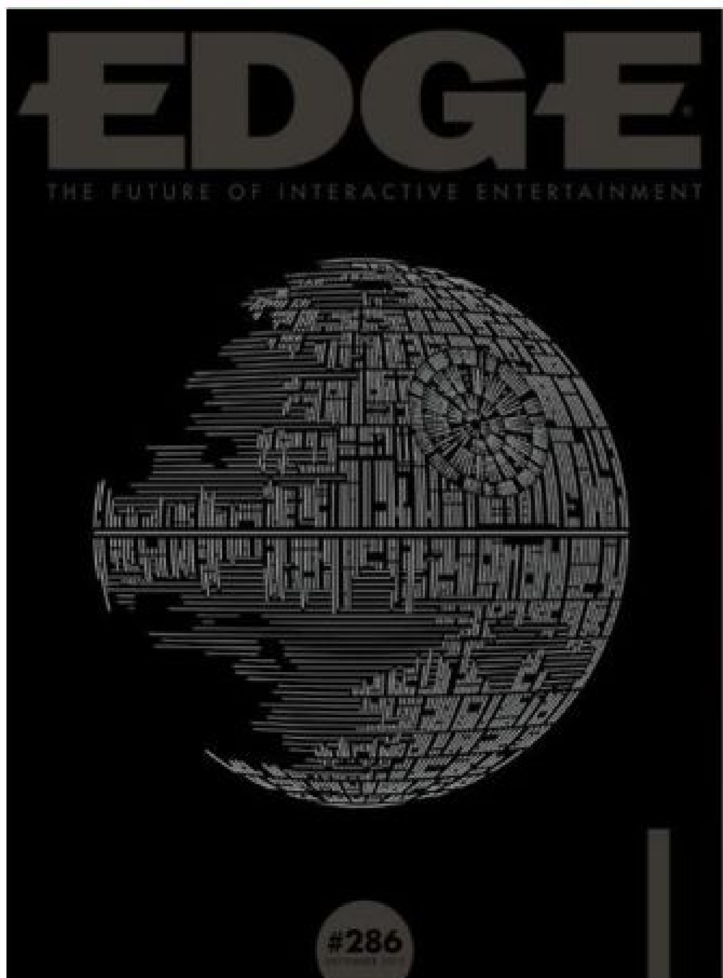


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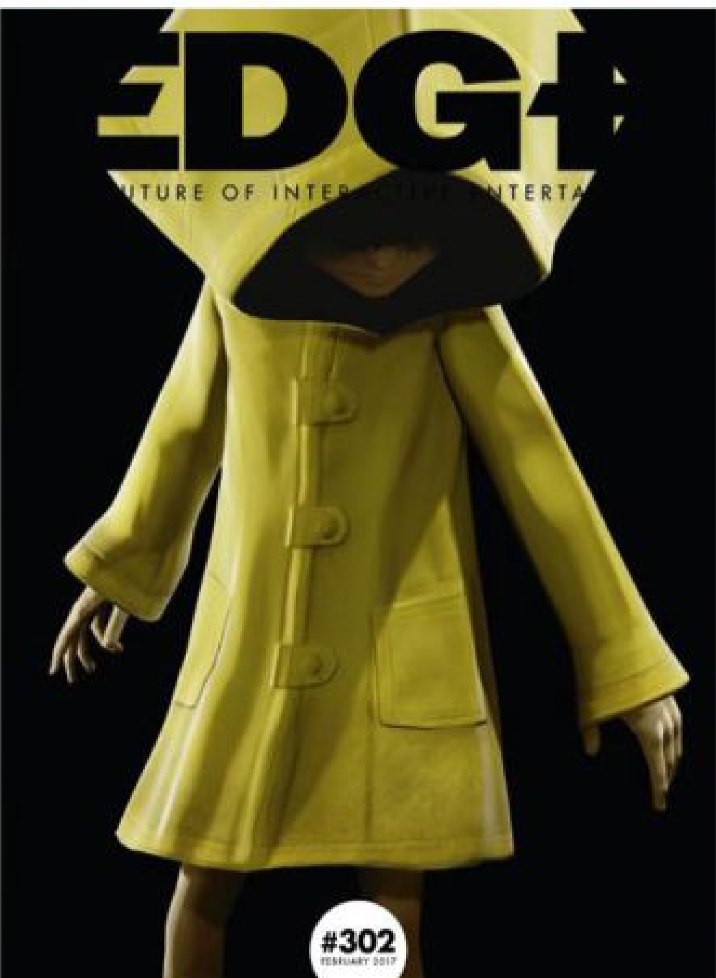











SUPER PLAY

The finest Super Nintendo ever made has just launched. What does that mean for emulation?

By Alex Wiltshire

What's the best way to play a Super Nintendo today? Is it on an original machine? This, surely, is the authentic option, which comes complete with the cathartic pleasure of cleaning the pins of your cartridges with lighter fluid to get them working. But have you tried hooking one up to your modern TV? The mess of necessary dongles aside, seeing *Yoshi's Island* smeared across 55 inches of LCD is enough to puncture even the rosiest memory.

Perhaps it's an emulator running on your PC, or a Raspberry Pi hooked up to your living-room TV. They take a bit of setting up, but the results can look positively glorious, and save states lend the classics a touch of modern convenience. Yet in action, there's a nagging problem. Mario's jump doesn't quite marry with your memory of it. Software emulators can often feel mushy and slow, imposing a moment's lag that confounds your muscle memory.

Analogue's Super Nt offers a third option. Released in February, this $190 (£135) piece of hardware is built solely to play SNES titles. It has a cartridge slot on top so you can play your old games, and it has an HDMI output on the back, so you can plug it straight into your TV. When it launched in February it joined a number of consoles designed to bring SNES games to modern TVs. One is Nintendo's own, the Nintendo Classic Mini SNES, which launched in September last year with 21 games pre-installed. There's Hyperkin's Supa RetroN HD, which launched in January. They join Hyperkin's RetroN 5 and Cyber Gadget's Retro Freak, both of which can also play original cartridges from other systems, including NES, Mega Drive, TurboGrafx and Game Boy Advance.

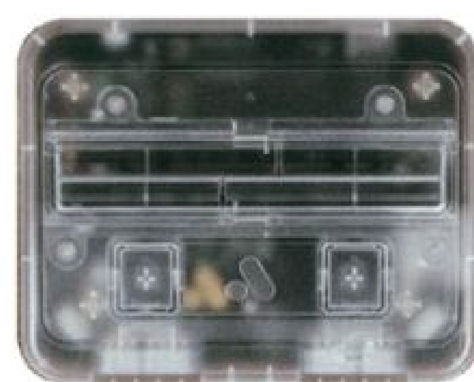
But the Super Nt sits at the pinnacle of the form. It feels authentic, looks authentic and plays that way, too. It's entirely lag-free, its video spooling from its processor as it's generated, backgrounds scrolling with the smoothness you remember from your old CRT, and yet it's blown up into pristine pixels which can be displayed with scanlines and scaling effects to evoke the way they were designed to be played.

For most, the practical difference between playing, say, *Axelay* on a Super Nt compared to a Nintendo Classic Mini SNES or Supa RetroN HD is negligible. But that would miss the point of what its maker, the Seattle-based startup Analogue, is trying to achieve. It's bringing audiophile sensibilities to playing classic games, elevating expectations for the way they should be experienced. From its industrial design to its packaging, the fonts in its instruction manual to its startup logo, Analogue has created a new tier of retro gaming.

Super Nt is not Analogue's first product, but it's the first to deliver its ideas at a realistic price. Its previous console, the NES-playing Nt Mini, was sold at $449 at launch, sporting a case milled from solid aluminium, HDMI and analogue outputs, cables and a controller. The barebones – and plastic – Super Nt comes with only HDMI output and no controller at all.

But both are built to achieve the same goal. "The core of what we do is to make products to celebrate and explore the history of videogames with the respect it deserves," Analogue founder **Christopher Taber** tells us. "What that means is that we're reimagining a system, producing an aftermarket product that allows you to play the cartridges from a SNES."









Super Nt comes in four colours, two evoking the two editions of the original SNES


Analogue


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MOTHER 2
ROCKMAN X
スーパーファミコン
CAPCOM
SHVC-S2
ZOMBIES
ZELDA
SUPER METROID
SUPER MARIO
Nintendo

Game emulation has always lived with compromises. Emulators have to balance accuracy, so games play just like they always did. They play without lag and frames skipping – and they're also convenient to access, easy to set up and look good on modern displays. But even on modern processors, perfectly accurate emulation is remarkably computationally expensive, as software, largely running one instruction after another in serial, is attempting to simulate the precise flows of data and timings on console chips which run in parallel.

That's important because many games were built to exploit the weird interplays of consoles' components to create special effects. When *Speedy Gonzales: Los Gatos Bandidos*, a SNES game published by Acclaim in 1995, is played in emulators that are tuned for speed this otherwise unremarkable platformer will crash on level 6-1 because of a specific way a switch you have to push in the game was programmed. Only an emulator tuned for accuracy would model the precise hardware conditions that allow the switch to function.

Over the past 20 years or so, hundreds of programmers have worked to build libraries of software to emulate old gaming hardware, steadily covering add-ons, peripherals and revisions. Their toil comes for free, is often open-source and while it's surely most commonly used as simply a way of playing games that people don't own, it's also where preservation of videogame history is at its most accessible and active. Figures in the community, such as 'byuu', creator of Higan, the most accurate software SNES emulator available today, aren't only interested in making games playable, but also in documenting them. Byuu is also laboriously creating a database that details the technical details of the cartridge and ROM of every SNES release, from every territory.

"I think it's important to strive for the best accuracy possible, both for the preservation aspect of the system and to avoid only looking at the most popular games," says **Fabian Knopf**, a contributor to the long-running emulator snes9x. "Which is why I really respect the work byuu is doing on Higan, where you can actually use it as a reference for the hardware most of the time." But that comes with a cost: Higan is also processor-intensive, beyond the capabilities of the cheap chips found in most aftermarket SNES consoles.

Super Nt does not run on a software emulator, and it doesn't operate with the same compromises. It's built on an entirely different approach to emulation which utilises a special chip, a Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA), to act as the hardware in a SNES. To all intents and purposes, the FPGA in a Super Nt *is* a SNES, and thus Analogue claims it's entirely accurate. *Yoshi's Island*, which features a Super FX2 chip in its cartridge to enhance its ability to scale and morph sprites, runs perfectly. Plug into it a Game Genie, a cartridge designed by Codemasters to inject code into games that can effect cheats, and it will function just as it does on an original SNES. So will



Super Nt doesn't come with a controller, but Analogue worked with 8bitdo to develop the Retro Receiver, which plugs into its controller port to support Bluetooth controllers

a Super Gameboy. The only peripheral that doesn't work is a Super Scope, and that's only because light guns only work with CRT TVs.

The engineer behind the Super Nt is **Kevin Horton**, otherwise known in the emulation community as Kevtris. By day he works three-and-a-half hours at the cryogenics company he's been employed by for 26 years, having joined out of high school, designing circuit boards and programming machines that preserve blood and organs. By night – he's essentially nocturnal, going to bed at 6.30am every morning – he makes FPGAs to emulate game systems for Analogue.

Horton's interest in recreating older hardware dates back to 1994, when he began making hardware SID players which generated music for the Commodore 64. He then graduated to FPGA chips once they became affordable, creating in 2004 the first fully functional NES emulator. "I made a board for it and I thought I might be able to sell it, but never ultimately did," he says. "I just didn't get around to it and didn't think people would pay the money. The problem was that FPGA chips were too expensive – until recently."

Most chips, including CPUs and GPUs, are designed to function in specific ways, but FPGA chips are entirely configurable. The one inside the Super Nt, an Altera Cyclone V, features 49,000 logic blocks, each of which can act as a

FOR ALL INTENTS THE FPGA IN A SUPER NT IS A SNES, AND THUS ANALOGUE CLAIMS IT'S ENTIRELY ACCURATE





From top: Fabian Knopf contributes to snes9x; Kevin Horton engineered the Super Nt

logic gate – whether an AND, OR or NOR – and can be linked to others. Horton can therefore configure them to behave just like each of the different components in a SNES: its CPU, digital signal processor for audio, and picture-processing units.

Engineering the Super Nt was an exercise in precise and complete backward engineering. "I try to make it conform as closely as possible to the [original] hardware," Horton says. And so, during the process, he would hook a real SNES chip into the FPGA he was piecing together and run them in step, watching every instruction cycle to ensure it exactly matched up. He'd play games on both pieces of hardware simultaneously with the same inputs, the FPGA displaying through HDMI and the SNES on a CRT, to ensure they looked identical. He ran two billion cycles of random data through his FPGA and a SNES CPU to check they'd remain in perfect sync. "It took five or six days without it failing," he says. "That's how I know the CPU is pretty much perfect." ▶

ANALOGUE STORY

Analogue's history is a classic story of a hobby turning into a business, but despite being founded on a dose of nostalgia and making passion products, it's underscored by serious business insight. It started when Christopher Taber went to college in Montana and found himself wanting to play the games he played as a child. As he started to hunt for particular titles on Craigslist and at garage sales, he fell into retro-gaming culture and realised there was a market for the gems he was finding. He established a successful online store selling hardware, much of which was broken when he got it, so he taught himself to fix it. "I can fix every videogame system up to Xbox," he says.

That led to modifying systems to support better video output, and then he came across the Neo Geo AES. "It just blew my mind. I wanted to play the games, which were really expensive, really hard to find." Taber's canny grasp of the market allowed him to see that people who'd pay to collect Neo Geo games might be attracted to a truly premium expression of its hardware, so he asked a local woodworker to create beautiful enclosures for modded Neo Geo hardware and began to sell them.

From there he jumped to a less niche system, the NES. The Analogue Mini, launched in 2014, featured a milled aluminium case by industrial designer Ernest Dorazio, original NES boards and enhanced video output: a premium product for a wider market. Then, bringing in Kevin Horton, Analogue released the Nt Mini last year, an FPGA-powered NES with a tweaked version of the same aluminium shell which they could make in greater volumes.

"I don't buy a lot of things – I'm not a materialistic, consumerist kind of individual – but when I purchase something I want it to last a long time, hopefully forever, and usually that means it's made with outstanding attention to detail," Taber says. "So that was naturally the place to start. Obviously it's interesting to me that nothing like that has been cultivated in the videogame industry." Though he's faced a good deal of consternation at Analogue's prices, he says over time more and more people have come to appreciate the values he's instilled in its products.

The Super Nt is by far Analogue's cheapest product, but it comes with plenty of premium details. Its box is finished in a matte paper with a subtle logo stamped into it. It starts up with an animation by Phil Fish ("He ordered a Neo Geo and we stayed in touch") and sound by electronic artist Squarepusher ("It was a mini dream to get him"). Alongside Super Nt, Analogue launched new company branding by Cory Schmitz, the designer behind countless logos for games, from Oculus Rift to *Nidhogg II*, and who also laid out the printed logos on Super Nt's PCB, which is the classiest board of electronics you've ever seen. ▶











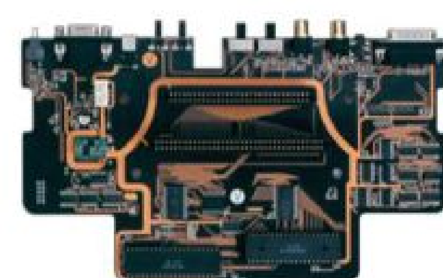
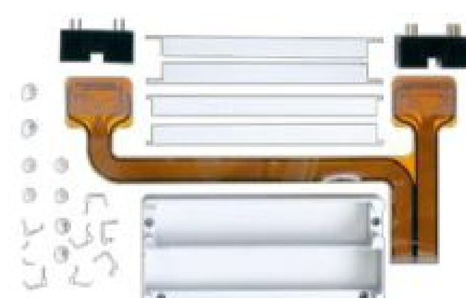
From top: The Analogue Nt featured modded NES hardware in an aluminium shell, here anodised in red; it was followed up by Nt Mini, which featured no original chips; packaging reflects Analogue's values. Analogue's first product (right) was a Neo Geo in a polished wooden case


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"WHEN I PURCHASE SOMETHING I WANT IT TO LAST A LONG TIME, HOPEFULLY FOREVER"





Analogue's first FPGA console was Nt Mini, which plays NES games. A product tuned for luxury, it features a full set of digital and analogue outputs, supports original controllers and comes in a milled aluminium casing

Recreating a SNES in this way was, Horton says, ten times more complex than recreating the NES, as the SNES' 16bit innards, and its wider set of modes and functions, are much more sophisticated. But on top of that, he rewrote the software backend he had created for Nt Mini. This set of menu options manages the console and presents scaler options and configurable secondary modes which tweak tiny aspects of play: the choice between a zero-lag display mode which adjusts the NTSC SNES' original display frequency of 60.09Hz to the 60Hz of a standard HDTV, for instance, or two buffered modes which run games at their slightly increased original speed. For PAL players, simply getting to play SNES games at 60Hz is revelation enough, but these options are an indication of the detail Horton has invested in the Super Nt.

And if he wants to add anything new, or if its emulation is caught out by some edge case, such as the specific way *Front Mission: Gun Hazard* uses the SNES' HDMA to tweak its graphical effects, Horton can issue new firmware which can fix it, since FPGA chips are completely reconfigurable. As a piece of pure hardware created for a specific purpose, Super Nt can barely be improved upon, because its every aspect can be changed with an update. "Its perfection is open," says Taber.

Super Nt's emergence hasn't been entirely without controversy. Byuu, who declined to be interviewed for this feature, took some offence to some of the reporting on Taber's claims for FPGA accuracy over a software approach. "There is absolutely nothing inherent in the design of FPGAs that make them capable of more accuracy than code running on a PC," Byuu wrote on his website. Taber is unrepentant about his belief in Super Nt's philosophy. "Byuu is legit; he has busted his ass successfully making the best software emulator ever created," he says. "But there are many things about software emulators that currently do not have solutions, and they provide compromises that an FPGA avoids."

It's safe to say that Super Nt is fundamentally welcomed by the emulation community, including byuu, particularly as it's engineered by one of its key figures. But that's not so true for all the aftermarket SNES consoles. Hyperkin's RetroN 5, for example, was discovered in 2014 to be running emulation cores from RetroArch and Libretro, including Genesis Plus GX and snes9x, which were being used in breach of their licences. In 2015, Cybergadget's RetroFreak used the same code, and last year it happened again with Retro-Bit's Super Retro Cade, which comes with over 90 pre-installed games. Both Hyperkin and Cybergadget passed the buck to the external contractor who developed their products' emulation backends. RetroN 5 has remedied this, breaking compatibility with several games in the process. Cybergadget and Retro-Bit, for their part, have ▶

not been so forthcoming with positive action, but are both either in talks or reviewing the claims.

"Snes9x has always had a strictly non commercial license, even before I started contributing," says Knopf, who has contributed new shader support and unicode support to the emulator. "I think the problems mainly made the community wary of commercial emulation releases in general, and reluctant to work with companies on projects. Most of the time the anger is not related to the fact that the companies make money by building on top of existing emulators, but to the blatant disregard of the licenses and the missing information on what emulators are used."

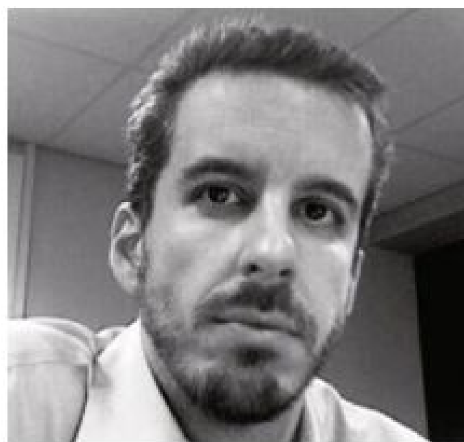
"These other companies are doing very little and taking advantage of other's free work," says Taber. "100 per cent of our products have been done in-house, so we're the only hardware guys who are actually doing all the work."

Not all emulation hardware has piggybacked on the toil of the community. Just as Analogue employed Horton, the creators of the Armiga hired Chui, the developer of Amiga emulator UAE4All, to integrate it with their ARM CPU-based hardware, expanding the emulator's compatibility and performance.

Unsurprisingly, Knopf hasn't witnessed similar positive feedback around snes9x, but feels that the recent emergence of so many hardware emulators for so many systems is fundamentally good, because it's expanding the opportunity for enthusiasts to access and play old games. "Lots of people don't have the means or knowledge to get an emulator running on a PC, not to speak of having a way to actually read old cartridges. It's also a very different feeling when you have some actual hardware to slot your game in and connect your controllers to. I'd say their main benefit is ease of use and their reproduction of the physical experience."

"From our point of view it's all about truly being a plug-and-play experience," says **Igor Modino Pérez**, who is one of the team behind the Armiga. "Our customers don't want the hassle of configuring an emulator." Finding the right version of Kickstart, the Amiga's firmware, entails flaunting its copyright. But Armiga has bought a licence to use it. "So you don't need to get your hands dirty to make it work."

Licensing is a sticky subject for the whole field. Software emulation often requires acquiring copyrighted firmware and BIOSes. Super Nt gets around it because the SNES' patents expired around ten years ago, and it's specifically designed to work with original cartridges, not pirated ROMs (unless you install, ahem, jailbroken firmware). And licensing old games is extremely complicated. Many systems ship with games pre-installed, like The C64 Mini, which features 64. Four of them, *Uridium*, *Paradroid*, *Gribbly's Day Out* and *Ranarama*, were developed by Steve Turner and **Andrew Braybrook** of the studio Graftgold, but neither were approached about their games featuring on the machine. "Steve and I are no longer in the loop," Braybrook says. "We don't know who is licensing our old games or where they're getting the game images from. I don't even know if the four games on the C64 Mini are hacked copies or not. If they are hacked copies, like on other emulator CDs, then I'm not very impressed, anything could be broken in there."





Igor Modino Pérez (top) is one of the leads behind the Armiga; Ernest Dorazio is the industrial designer behind Analogue's consoles

"Tracking down the provenance of games that have been written decades ago is never easy," says **Darren Melbourne**, co-director of The 64 Mini maker Retro Games, who says his team takes great care to ensure they're the "official 'clean' versions of the original titles". "It's remarkably rare for there to be a clear line of ownership, with bankruptcies and time being the major frustration to our licensing efforts. I've spent the past 20 or more years tracking down the owners of retro games, and as such we would never work with content that we hadn't licensed from the owner of the IP, although this can also prove to be a contentious point from time to time." Melbourne says the licences for Braybrook's games were bought from Rebellion Developments, who snapped up original publisher Hewson Consultants' assets when it went bankrupt in 1991.

Braybrook accepts that since Graftgold doesn't exist any more there's no legal way to pick up royalties. But he welcomes the chance for his old games to be playable again. "Tapes and floppy disks weren't manufactured to last 30 years. I would like to rescue my game collections on to more modern media so that I can be sure they will last, and so that I can still play them."

"I WOULD LIKE TO RESCUE MY GAME COLLECTIONS ON TO MORE MODERN MEDIA SO I CAN BE SURE THEY WILL LAST"

BODY FORM


Super Nt's curves are carefully designed to evoke the Japanese and European SNES, rightly ditching the boxy horror of the US model, while forging its own identity. Designer Ernest Dorazio is proud of the way he managed to give it such a low profile while fitting in the mounting for the cartridge, and spent a week laying out the cartridge slot and power and reset buttons with the controller ports on the front. "There are patterns, certain numbers in the measurements that you'll find," he says. "In the original machine, the number seven kept coming up when I was measuring it. I'm not sure why." Through the process he gained an appreciation for Nintendo's industrial design and the quality of the SNES' build. "Everything fits together very well. But if you look at the N64, that's the best thing they ever designed. It's amazing."

It's fascinating that so many of these systems have appeared recently. For Pérez it's just a matter of time. "At some point we all have nostalgia, and people getting to around 40 start to demand the products from their childhood." But more than that, today small companies can bring products like these to market like never before. "Until recently, to make a retro product behave exactly like the original, manufacturers needed to reproduce the hardware as a custom chip running at its heart," says **Chris Smith**, another co-director of Retro Games. But making custom chips is expensive, and any errors risk even greater costs. "Also, such a product will be no more powerful than the original machine, so no HDMI, no USB, no beautiful and easy-to-use user interface at 720p and so on."

"Hardware has reached a point where it is possible to create a cheap-enough system with enough power to emulate the system," agrees Knopf, who also says the RetroArch team's work to unify different emulators under a single frontend has helped bring about hardware supporting many systems.

But among all these consoles, Analogue takes a fresh path. Super Nt, like Mini Nt before it, supports a single system with the singleminded aim of bringing about the very best way of playing its games. It's expensive, it doesn't support many modern conveniences, and you have to own the games. Analogue's approach is therefore not for everyone. That's something we can really get behind. ■


HARVEST MOON
SUPER NINTENDO
PAL VERSION
Nintendo
スーパーファミコン
SHVC-RI
SUPER METROID
スーパーメトロイド
© 1994 Nintendo
MADE IN JAPAN
SHVC-RX
CAPCOM
SHVC-AF2J-JPN
BREATH of FIRE II
ATLUS
SUPER MARIO WORLD
スーパーマリオワールド
© 1990 Nintendo
MADE IN JAPAN
KONAMI
Soul Blazer
UBI SOFT
Nintendo
SUPER NINTENDO
FIRE EMBLEM
Genealogy of the Holy War
Nintendo
SHVC-MB
スーパーファミコン
© 1994 Nintendo
MADE IN JAPAN
2
CAPCOM
SHVC-AR3J-JPN
スーパーファミコン
CHRONO TRIGGER
クロノ・トリガー
SQUARESOFT



Developers and speedrunners break down the constituent parts of their speedgames to examine what makes them tick

By Jen Simpkins

We are addicted to speed. Humans have long been intoxicated by a desire to go faster, seeking the hit of adrenaline released into our brains by a powerful sprint or a floored pedal. The pursuit of speed has pushed athletes to incredible feats, and inspired countless racing drivers to risk their lives. It was perhaps inevitable that, as videogames have evolved from a casual pastime to the competitive arena, both developers and players have hit the gas on their games, too.

Once a deeply niche community, speedrunning is now bigger than ever, with previously tiny event Awesome Games Done Quick drawing in over 200,000 viewers at once and $2,263,163 for charity during its January event this year. Alongside the popular nostalgia of *Super Mario 64* and *Ocarina Of Time*, smaller games can shine: it's becoming a legitimate way to get your game noticed. (Indeed, there's a growing trend in small-time indie devs building and marketing new titles as 'speedgames' to high-profile runners, which rarely seems to be well-received.) People love to watch people play games at impossible speeds. Partly, it's about seeing someone showing off input skills honed through hours of practice; partly, it's about witnessing hilarious skips and glitches that can break games entirely, often to the undisguised glee of the runner – and, sometimes, the pained disbelief of the developer.

There are plenty of reasons *not* to build your game with speedrunning as a consideration: it can be a lot of work to do so, and seeing your game shown to be buggy can be embarrassing. This year's AGDQ saw a marked Twitter furore from indie devs regarding some runners' glib mockery of games they were intentionally breaking.



Michal Staniszewski, game director, *Bound*



Still, alongside an increased interest in speedrunning, there's been a notable uptick in the inclusion of tools for speedrunners in recent games – even ones seemingly unsuited to being played for speed.

So why do it? Our discussions with the developers behind three speedgames reveal myriad motivations. For some, it can be an opportunity to get to know a new community – a group of people as dedicated to your creation as you are – and to learn something valuable from working closely with them. For others, building a game to be speedrun is about throwing down the gauntlet, relishing the chance to be surprised when your game is manipulated to extremes you never thought it could be.

But, curiously enough, the three popular speedgames over the course of these pages share a common narrative theme. And while it certainly takes a unique kind of person to speedrun a game, it's clear that these enthusiasts are simply a more extreme case of the average player of videogames. Speed is the by-product: the impulse is something else entirely, something more universal, something found in devs, runners, and casuals alike – that drive to confront our very limits. ▶



Staniszewski put out a job ad for a speedrunner/designer, hiring Adam Debski to build the game's speedrunning layer. "The only thing is that he's currently like, number four on the leaderboard," Staniszewski laughs



THERE'S BEEN A NOTABLE UPTICK IN THE INCLUSION OF TOOLS FOR SPEEDRUNNERS IN RECENT GAMES

BOUND

Charles 'chuckles825' Maxwell

What aspects of *Bound* are most helpful for speedrunners?
The speedrun mode has the best built-in timer I've ever seen in a game. It pauses on loading times, has individual level splits, and can be hidden at any point. Records are often determined by 'real time attack', but this can lead to improper comparisons of runs due to different gaming hardware. Having an accurate in-game timer not only makes comparisons between runners easier, but also takes away from the distraction of using a separate timing program and manually hitting your splits.

Does seeing a game that's clearly 'built for speed' ever take some of the fun, or extra challenge, out of speedrunning it?
Whether a game is built for speed or not, the mechanics are what make or break it. If a speedrunner is dedicated enough to running and trying to break a game, they are bound to find something useful for a run, however small it may seem at first. There can be plenty of things that make a speedrun route more enjoyable than the devs intended. A developer can become too focused on what they see as unintended or harmful exploits to a game's core experience. It can feel very punishing when an exploit appears to have only been patched out of a game for the sake of a developer appearing more professional with their work.

But Plastic has been surprisingly open. A few skips the community found really broke some of the levels. Plastic not only allowed those skips to remain in-game, but some were actually added to the intended list of shortcuts. This kind of thing is unheard of. This game is honestly a very odd case when it comes to speedrunning, and I've grown to appreciate how unique it is.

But no matter the quality of your game, speedrunning isn't something that can be forced. It's the little bits of polish that are inobtrusive to movement that keep runners from losing interest over time. There is a mystical fine line in the QA process where a game should have most aspects fully tested, but not be so polished as to prevent any exploits or glitches from ever being found. Either that, or developers could always release more games in barely functioning states. I'm sure that could catch runners' attention.

What do you personally get out of speedrunning a game?
Fluid movement and controls are the defining factor in my enjoyment of a game: speedrunning felt like a natural evolution of wanting to master a game and challenge myself. It allows you to replay a game in ways you never would have thought of before, and it's a reminder of everything a game can offer. Everyone has their own motivation, but I would say most runners speedrun with the intention of having fun towards a common goal with their community.

THE END IS NIGH

Jay 'warm_ham' Lancaster

What makes running *The End Is Nigh* so stressful?
Between the first time and the hundredth time you play the game, the difficulty curve manages to feel the same. There's an impossible-to-ignore difficulty spike between the first and the second half – so if I'm on a good pace after the first half, I start getting nervous because I know that I have a 15 minute window coming up where the run can die anywhere. But if you're speedrunning a die-and-retry platformer, you should know what you're getting yourself into. Misery.

I'd say the hardest thing to reckon with that the devs intentionally included is a sudden change in physics during the last few levels that causes Ash to move slowly in one direction and quickly in one direction. Many people think that it's a controller issue when they first play the game, but it's just Ed and Tyler being cruel and unusual.

As a 2D, twitch-based platformer, it's a more traditional speedgame contender. Does that ever take some of the fun, or extra challenge, out of running it?
I'm not sure that *TEIN* is 'built for speed', honestly. *Celeste* and *Super Meat Boy* have that high-octane platforming action, with dashing and sprinting and all of the movement optimizations that come with those features. Ash just kind of flops his way through the levels. There is, however, so much careful decision-making involved, and these brutal moments of tension where movement actually stops altogether while you wait to time a jump. If there's anything a speedrunner hates to do, it's to wait. But that kind of subversive gameplay is what keeps me hooked – I love how the game makes me stop and think about my actions on occasion.

This game is, first and foremost, a game developer's existential crisis in software. Ed has suffered in some way, and he wants us to share in that suffering. Going fast feels good. Dying a long, slow death sucks. I think he went for the latter here.

As events like GDQ become more visible, it seems like more games make their speedrunning capabilities more evident. Do you ever feel pandered to by that?
I generally don't bother with games that include a 'speedrun timer', or with games that market themselves as 'engineered for speedrunners'. They don't get it. Speedrunning has nothing to do with game development and everything to do with what happens after. People form emotional connections with games they love, and then they want to play them over and over again.

Marketing to speedrunners just seems like a desperate call for help. Like, "Please play my game over and over, I swear my game has replay value, don't forget me." I think that devs are (very reasonably) afraid of being forgotten or glossed over in the current saturated landscape, so they see speedrunners and they think, "This is how I can be remembered."



"I DON'T KNOW HOW PEOPLE DO IT, PLAY EVERY DAY TO JUST SHAVE OFF A SECOND"

Of all the things that spring to mind when thinking about speed, ribbons and pirouettes are probably not among them. Balletic 3D platformer *Bound* is the last game you'd expect to be in a hurry, a narrative-driven 'notgame' in which you play a princess dancing through a metaphorical dreamscape to confront a series of traumas. But *Bound* has another face beneath its mask, and it's altogether different. Beat the game, and a dedicated speedrun mode is unlocked: a detailed in-game timer, leaderboard ghosts, the ability to skip cutscenes and more.

"It's not a perfect match to this game, the speedrunning option," Plastic creative director **Michal Staniszewski** says. "But we were thinking, 'If it will attract different communities, then we'll have more targeted people.'" Despite what it might sound like, it was less a marketing ploy than a continuation of his studio's philosophy. Plastic has always been a community-focused endeavour, with its roots in the demoscene subculture, and building PC benchmark software for the overclocking community. A new game was an opportunity for the studio to ingratiate itself with a new group of enthusiasts. "I'm curious about the world, and people," Staniszewski says. "When I first saw the Awesome Games Done Quick events, I was like, 'Wow, that's cool. Maybe we should think about it.' It was about trying to find ourselves in a new community. And it was like, a challenge to research what kind of exploits are in speedrunning games, and what are the important things."

Given that only a handful of players would speedrun *Bound*, the team's focus was on the notgame fundamentals: the story, the art style, the simple platforming and the freeform level structure. Much like in *Mega Man*, *Bound*'s





McMillen has accepted his games being broken as part of the modern "super meta" of gaming. Glaiel adds: "It's fun when it happens in a well-made game, rather than being broken and annoying"

five levels can be completed in any order. Each ends in a 'hazard', a traumatic obstacle that the Princess must confront: once defeated, traces of it disappear from other levels, and shortcuts open up. For the casual player, it's an exploratory experience – but for a runner, it's an opportunity to puzzle out an optimal route from among hundreds of possibilities. "When we made the core game with all the mechanics, it wasn't a lot of extra work," Staniszewski says. "During game design, there's a lot of tedious work that needs to be done, but making shortcuts was something we enjoyed."

The team even programmed in exploits for runners to find. The most common one involves event boxes, invisible spaces that trigger something in-game when a player enters them, being purposefully stretched so that runners would only have to touch a few pixels to quickly progress. Safe to say, Plastic is practically asking for its game to be broken. "You see that someone put a lot of effort into that," Staniszewski says. "A glitch that happens regularly is a glitch, but if someone puts a month of investigating into finding something, then it's really enjoyable." His personal favourite was found in the tutorial level by *Bound* speedrunner Yasha Setsu. "You need to do a very precise jump out of the chamber window into nowhere to land on a platform below. We found it so interesting, we decided to leave it."

Not all of *Bound*'s speedrunning optimisations are so beloved, however. Staniszewski laments the fact that the inevitable reliance on a few choice moves in speedruns – the roll jump, the ultra-precise edge jump which immediately grants another long jump – reduce the Princess' quixotic and varied moveset to a functional sprint to the finish. The very best speedrunners only hold the trigger to slowly 'dance' when it's absolutely crucial, for one or two seconds at a time, spinning up a shield to protect them from hazards. "The thing about *Bound* is it has very simple mechanics when you first look, but there are a lot of complicated mechanics hidden inside," Staniszewski says.

Bound is something of a paradox, then. "It was a mistake, because we actually targeted the polar opposites – it's like north and south, but nothing in between!" Staniszewski laughs. "And that was a big problem." The Platinum trophy remains out of reach to casual notgame players (only two of Plastic's team have achieved it), while *Bound* hasn't fully taken off in the speedrunning community, having never appeared at a Games Done Quick event. But Staniszewski has faith that *Bound*'s multifaceted nature and the studio's continued community support will propel the game to greater heights. "The same as with the PC benchmark, I'm starting to understand how *Bound* really works *after* release. Maybe *Bound* will be discovered by the speedrunning community in a couple of years, and that will be cool. But *Bound* has longer legs than I thought it would have."

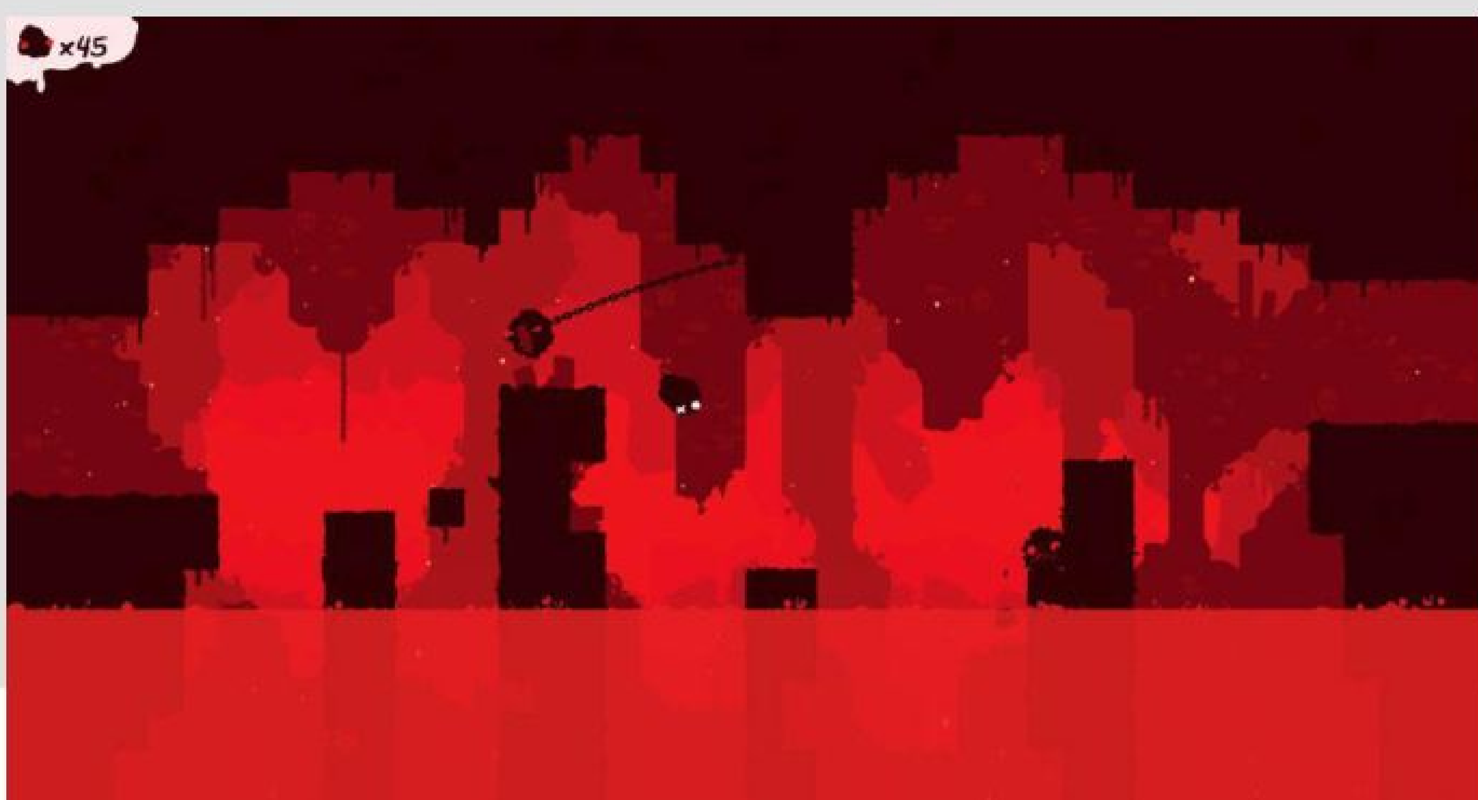


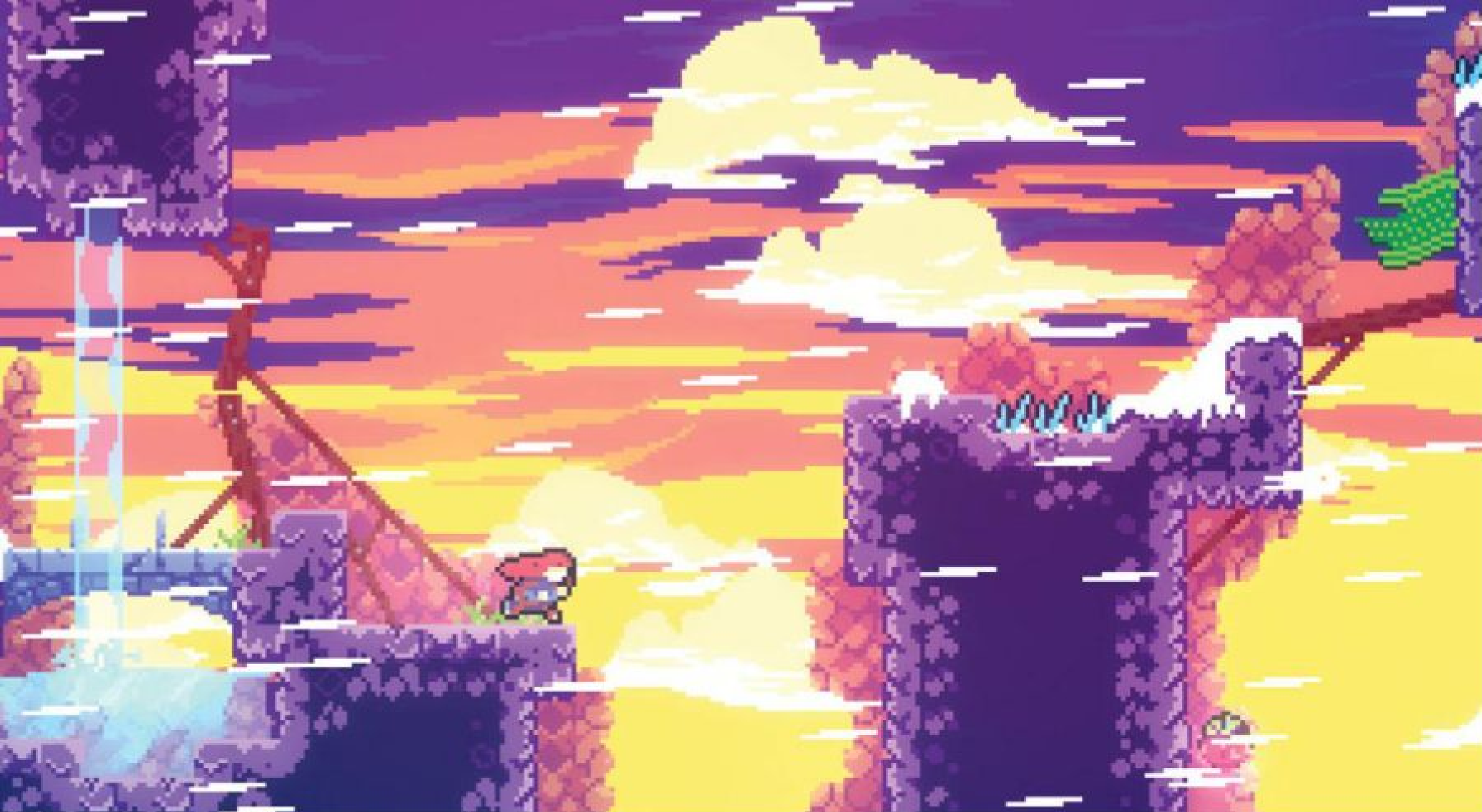


Edmund McMillen (top) and Tyler Glaiel, *The End Is Nigh* co-creators

On the opposite end of the spectrum is *The End Is Nigh*, a game whose speedgame qualities are in perfect, grim alignment with its apocalyptic narrative. Upon its announcement, most people had already made their assumptions about a new 2D platformer from **Edmund McMillen**, one of the minds behind *Super Meat Boy*. But *The End Is Nigh* is a very different beast. With puzzle-game developer **Tyler Glaiel** on board, Ash's adventure was set to be more Metroidvania than *Meat Boy*. "We knew it'd be speedrun," McMillen says. "But it wasn't like, 'Hey, let's make a game for speedrunners.' It was more like, 'Hey, let's make a game that's really high pressure – and *if* someone was speedrunning this, it would be incredibly stressful."

While twitch controls remain, *The End Is Nigh* calls for a more considered approach to its branching maze of levels. The biggest subversion is the lack of wall jump: instead, hopping up and around levels involves flinging Ash onto a spike, or gripping the corner of a platform, pausing to figure out your next move, and leaping off again. It can be extraordinarily slow going. But as the game ramps up ▶





A tool-assisted speedrun (a set sequence of optimal inputs) broke *Celeste*. Thorson was intrigued: "The pioneer aspect of being the first one to figure out ways to break the game, there's still room in *Celeste* for that"



Matt Thorson, designer, *Celeste*

towards multiple endings, the pressure is piled on. First, there is the horrifying realisation that the next phase of the game counts tumours, that you may or may not have collected, as lives. And if you make it through that, then you're thrown into an escape sequence and made to run it all backwards. In six minutes. With a timer mocking you in the top-right corner of the screen. If there was any doubt that McMillen likes to see players suffer, *The End Is Nigh* might convince otherwise.

"It's not suffering, it's excitement!" McMillen insists. "It makes for a much more exciting playthrough, and I think in the end, it lasts longer. You feel better about it overall, that you made it through." It's certainly a compelling watch, especially when speedrun. "It's why people watch high-pressure sports stuff where it's like, 'I can't believe they landed that,'" he says. "Those people are shitting themselves! And that's why we like it. They choose something amazing that we can't do, and it's under so much pressure." Glaiel recalls furious emails from casual players upon release about the "fake, bullshit, lazy difficulty" that took so long to implement properly. "For the most part, for an average player, the pressure is kind of fake, because in the first half of the game you have infinite lives," he says. "In the second half, if you collected even half the collectibles, you have like, 200, which is usually plenty. You don't lose even that much when you get a game over – you go back to the checkpoint."

But for speedrunners, the slightest mistake can end a run, costing significant chunks of time. The visual thumbscrews are all by design: the life total, the timer, the ghosts that remain wherever you die to a particularly evil jump. *The End Is Nigh* was built for stress, then, not speed. But speedruns tend to bring out the best in it. "There were some areas of the game, after the fact – maybe two or three levels – where I *did* add shortcuts for speedrunners specifically," McMillen says. "Like, I don't want to see somebody sit here and watch this fucking square do a whole revolution before they have to get through. But I wanted to make this game, and I had a feeling that speedrunners would like it, because the design that was in place happened to align with what they're doing."

McMillen knows a little something about pressure: after all, he's the guy who made *Super Meat Boy*, and the world and his own mind won't let him forget it. Making *The End Is Nigh* was his way of talking about it. "It helped me inch my way out of depression, and kind of accept who I am, where I am, and what I want out of life," he says. "And that's kind of what the game is about: being realistic, and realising sometimes the difficult path isn't always necessarily the best." Despite its accessible control scheme, however, *The End Is Nigh*'s bleak subject matter and hardcore difficulty is undeniably niche – even more so in the hands of its runners. "They have to be masochists, to a certain degree," McMillen says. "I don't know how people do it, play every day to just shave off a second. And they're not even playing *The End Is Nigh* – they're playing a whole other game. It takes a very specific type of person to do that."

Madeline doesn't know why she's climbing the mountain. *Celeste*'s protagonist is stuck in a rut, suffering from regular and debilitating panic attacks, and is determined to make some progress towards something – *anything*. She sets an entirely arbitrary goal of reaching the summit of Mount Celeste. It is perhaps no coincidence that *Towerfall* creator **Matt Thorson**'s latest was shaped significantly by the speedrunning community.

Celeste started life as a platformer for fantasy videogame console PICO-8, was quickly discovered by keen runners, and even featured at Summer Games Done Quick 2016. One of the people speedrunning the game just so happened to be Kevin Regamey, who'd previously worked with Thorson on *Towerfall*'s singleplayer time-trial mode ("He was the reason we had secret developer times, because he was beating them insanely fast"). It was a no-brainer: Regamey was recruited to help develop *Celeste 2.0* to be a potentially excellent speedgame, alongside a few other runners that became official beta testers.

While its control scheme is simple – Madeline has just a jump, a dash and a wall climb – *Celeste* makes endless, precise demands of its user at every turn. The next step was to include another layer of secret movement techniques. Thorson took *Towerfall*'s hidden hyperjump as inspiration for one, including in *Celeste* a hyperdash that grants players a huge momentum boost when hitting jump immediately after a diagonal dash into the ground. "As I was designing the levels, we basically just ignored those," he says. "If they let people break the levels, that's fine, because most players won't even know those techniques exist. Then we ended up going back, actually, and started tweaking some levels to make them more interesting when you have all those really high-level skills. You can break, and sequence-break, a lot of the game with that stuff."

Does Thorson enjoy watching people break his games, then? "I think it depends on how the game is breaking!" he laughs. "Some speedrunning games at GDQ are like, 'If I do this, there's a 50 per cent chance the game crashes' – that kind of thing would be embarrassing. But the stuff where they're breaking the speed cap, it's partially intended, and stuff we hoped would happen." He compares the act of speedrunning a game to the love players pour into lore and fanart. "They're taking the time to understand the story at such a deep level – it's like that, but for mechanics. They're getting so deep that they're doing stuff that we didn't really predict, and they're seeing them in this new way. It's really, really cool."

A subtler call to speedrunners involved the overall structure of the game, with extra-tough B-sides and terrifying secret C-side levels slowly introducing advanced mechanics

to those who make it to the repeat-playthrough stage. Even extras such as entirely optional collectible strawberries, crystal hearts, and golden strawberries that require deathless runs to snag, were part of the plan. "That was our way of trying to nudge players toward that," Thorson says. "It's meant to transition players through all this stuff. Hopefully for someone who has never speedrun before, and is just kind of interested in speedrunning, *Celeste* is the game that can ease them into it." Thorson and team's game is not just created for current runners, but hopes to inspire a whole new generation of them. And so far, it seems to be working: according to speedrun.com, *Celeste* currently has more active runners than *Super Mario 64*.

It's an unexpected, very heartfelt, and strangely specific goal – to provide players with an accessible on-ramp into a niche pursuit. Despite the continued process of building *Celeste* as a speedgame throughout development, it definitely created a lot more work for Thorson and his team to pull off. "I guess the question is, why do all that, and make a game for speedrunners?" Thorson says, taking the words right out of our mouth. "When people were speedrunning the PICO-8 game, pushing it to its limits, that really inspired us. When we're designing games, we're always looking for ways to make it for people to explore as deeply as possible – to get *really* lost in it, the mechanics, the story, and everything. Speedrunning seemed like the pinnacle of that. With the success of *Towerfall*, we had the luxury of taking a bit longer. We wanted to push the game as far as we could. We're glad we got to." And, speedrunner or not, as you reach the peak of Mount Celeste at your own pace, you're glad, too. ■

"THEY'RE GETTING SO DEEP THAT THEY'RE DOING STUFF WE DIDN'T REALLY PREDICT"

CELESTE

Jamison 'TGH' Randall

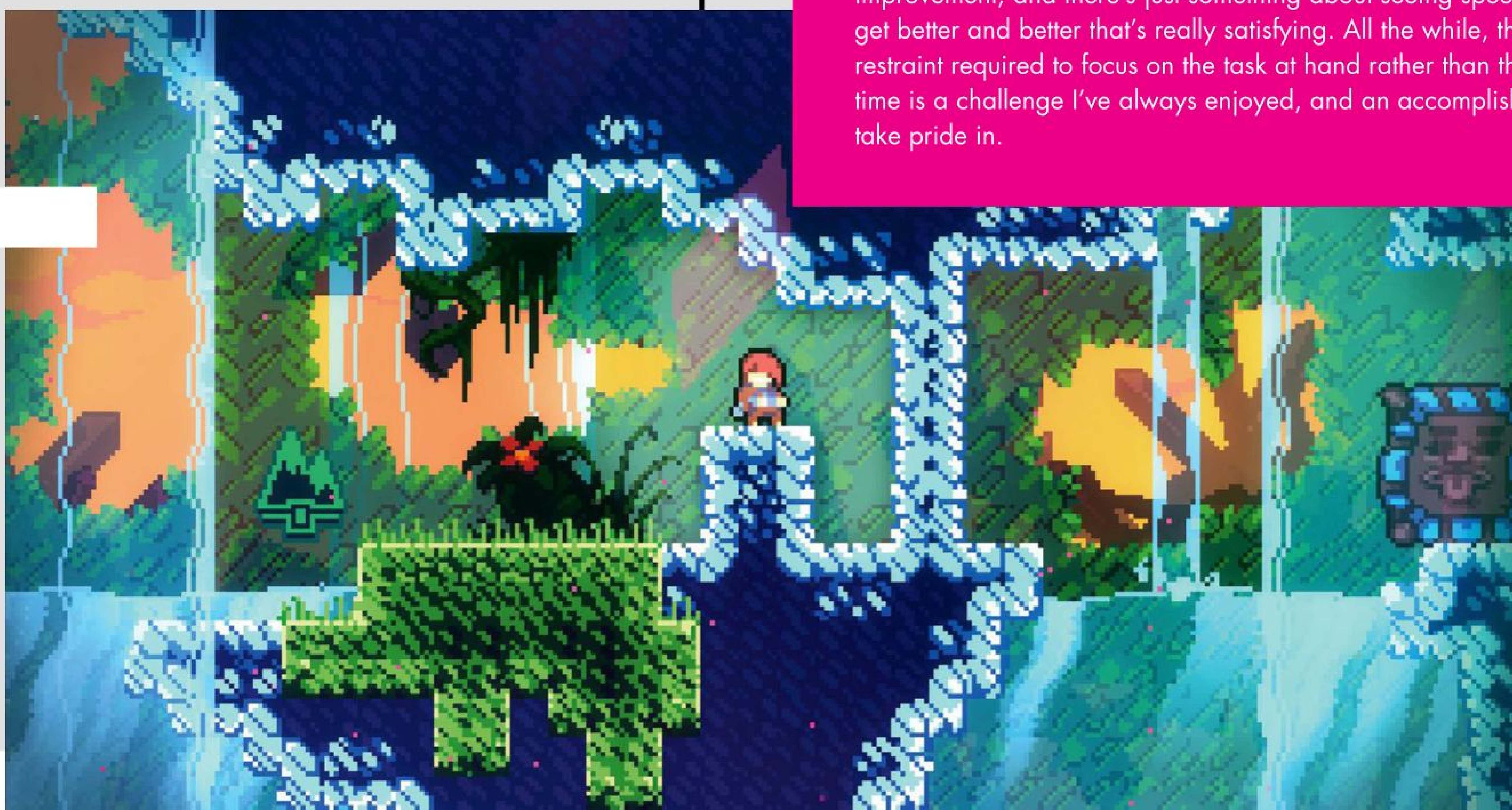
What makes *Celeste* such a great speedgame?
Celeste has very simple controls, zero RNG, and an extremely high skill cap. A new runner can complete a run without any of the advanced movement techniques, and then learn new tricks and add slightly faster nuances to movement at their own pace. Once you get to a high level, it doesn't get stale to keep trying for a better time, because you know there is always room to improve, and no dependency on RNG.

What's the most difficult part of speedrunning it?
I think it's the same case with any speedgame – you can get punished for trying to play too fast. And it's really easy to get into the habit of doing that. To me, the most difficult part of running *Celeste* specifically is being consistent, and not attempting to play above your own current skill level. There are more difficult shortcuts which are developer-intended and might save about a second each, but quite a few of them runners don't go for, because the game hasn't quite reached that level of optimisation yet.

Does seeing a game that's clearly 'built for speed' ever take some of the fun out of speedrunning it?
It really doesn't, to be honest. The core movement techniques are dynamic enough that, even in a pretty much glitchless Any% run, more and more tricks and strategies are still being found every single day, even a month-and-a-half after its release. And it's those same dynamics that add to the fun for me personally, rather than take away from it.

It seems like more games make their speedrunning capabilities more evident. Do you ever feel pandered to by that?
Honestly, I've never really paid attention to that. The games I speedrun are typically games that I really enjoy casually, and later decide that I want to speedrun. Nevertheless *Celeste*, despite its obviously intended 'invitations' to be speedrun, doesn't strike me as the kind of game that has that sort of goal in mind.

What is it about speedrunning that really excites you?
I've always been extremely competitive and obsessed with self-improvement, and there's just something about seeing speedrun times get better and better that's really satisfying. All the while, the self-restraint required to focus on the task at hand rather than the resulting time is a challenge I've always enjoyed, and an accomplishment I can take pride in.



THE MAKING OF...



HORIZON ZERO DAWN

How Killzone's maker turned its back on the military shooter and headed into open new world

By Alex Wiltshire

Developer Guerrilla Games
Publisher SIE
Format PS4
Origin Netherlands
Release 2017

Guerrilla Games knew it was taking a risk. Here was a studio that had focused entirely on *Killzone* for the best part of a decade, yet now it was embarking on a project which, by its very design, would naturally render obsolete a great deal of its craft. Guerrilla knew how to make linear, firstperson, sci-fi shooters. It hadn't made an open-world game before. And so it was only natural that it got cold feet.

Horizon Zero Dawn was born in response to an internal call for pitches Guerrilla made in 2009, near the end of development of *Killzone 3*. It was time, management believed, for the studio to stretch its wings and try something new, and between 30 and 40 pitches came in, each reviewed by managing director Hermen Hulst and Guerrilla's board. The brief was no puzzle games and no racing games: other studios did them better. An action game, then, which catered to a wide but traditional gaming audience, and which would leverage the studio's considerable strengths in technology and visual design. "That's why *Horizon* was such a good match," says game director **Mathijs de Jonge**.

Studio art director Jan-Bart Van Beek had submitted an idea for an open-world action-RPG about a woman living in a future roamed by giant war robots, in which nature had grown over the civilisation of the past. "It was also a hard and very difficult match because we had no open-world experience," de Jonge continues. "We had no idea how to design a game like that." Once another verdant post-apocalypse had appeared in the form of Ninja Theory's *Enslaved: Odyssey To The West*, Guerrilla decided to work on another pitch, an action game about killing monsters in a fantastical alternative-history world similar to that of The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen. But when it was time to pitch Sony, Guerrilla got cold feet again. It had been gazumped one more time, this time by *The Order: 1886*, and besides, there was something about *Horizon* that kept drawing the team back. Hulst pitched both games; *Horizon* attracted the strongest feeling.

Horizon got the go-ahead, then, but Guerrilla wanted to play it safe. Knowing it would release on the then-next-generation PlayStation, the studio opted to make another game, *Killzone Shadow Fall*, as a launch title, and begin developing *Horizon Zero Dawn* on the side. "We felt it was good to be there at launch," technical director **Michiel van der Leeuw** tells us. It would give the team the chance to grasp what the PS4 was capable of within a familiar genre and series, rather than with a completely new one. "We were pretty scared, but it was even more scary to do a generation switch *and* a genre switch at the same time." And so until *Shadow Fall* was complete, *Horizon* was given an extended pre-production phase with just 14 developers, with *Shadow Fall* acting as an important testing ground. For one thing, a couple of its levels were much larger and more open than those found in previous *Killzone* games, giving the studio a chance to explore the technical and design implications of open worlds. Moreover, the two games shared the same engine, Decima, and features were added to *Shadow Fall* with *Horizon*'s needs in mind, such as enhanced lighting and atmospherics and foliage systems.



***Horizon*'s AI has to find its way around the world on the fly; pre-calculated pathfinding data wouldn't fit on the disc**

"IT WAS TOO CLOSE TO KILLZONE – WE NOTICED OURSELVES FALLING BACK INTO THE SAME VISUAL DESIGN"

"We were mainly just afraid of what was going to happen next," van der Leeuw says. "Open-world streaming was much more challenging than the linear things we were used to, even though we experimented with non-linearity in *Shadow Fall*. We had no idea how to script an open world. In non-linear worlds you can pick up a quest and wander off and do something else, and we had no idea how the scripting would deal with the complexities of the logic that required." But the largest challenge for his team was in providing the rest of the studio with the tools they'd need to make all the things that such a large world would demand. Work on the systems which helped create and manage characters, places and things, and the questing solution that would bind them together, would continue until the very end of development.

But back at the project's beginning, the *Horizon* team was thinking more about what that world would be. Van Beek's pitch provided the bones of the concept – ancient cities overtaken by nature, tribespeople and machines living in their shadows – but it needed a lot of fleshing out. "If you look back at the images of that pitch, things were presented in a very different way," van der Leeuw says. "It's easy to look at the finished game and think that from those ideas, only *Horizon* could have been made, but we had thousands of options back then. What kind of weapons would the tribes have? What would the machines look like?" The early answers seemed to lie in *Killzone*. The first prototypes used its M82 rifle, and the robots were militaristic. "The machines in the initial pitch were more nightmarish, like insects or war machines with lots of turrets and cannons on them," says de Jonge. "Style-wise they didn't look unique; they looked like they could be from lots of other games or movies."

"It was too close to *Killzone* – we noticed ourselves falling back into the same visual design," principal designer **Dennis Zopfi** says. "It felt like we were making the same game with a slightly different wrapper." Anxious to rid the machines of their nightmarish feel, they started to make them animalistic. The first machine that clinched the feeling they were grasping for was the Thunderjaw, a towering T-rex of a robot which came together in July 2011. The team crudely modelled a forest, put Thunderjaw-like blockmesh machines into it, and gave the players a primitive-looking outfit. "That gave us a unique mix, a look that *Horizon* could have," says de Jonge. "It was interesting: these machines had pieces that could be like puzzles in how you fight them, taking off their armour. We realised it was something we should focus on." Shooting parts off a machine added a layer of strategy to combat which inspired such new ideas as the ability to remove its weapons and use them against it. ▶

"When we added that rudimentary open world we started seeing the machines push aside trees," says Zopfi. "That connection with the world – we hadn't seen an open-world game with large creatures crashing through trees before. It really solidified that idea." They sketched out truly vast Tallnecks which added a sense of majesty to the machines, and then modelled the raptor-like Watchers, the first machines to be animated. "They had a character, a role that was special, and watching them push tall grass aside was really interesting," de Jonge says. "They didn't feel like you were fighting a machine, but an animal," Zopfi adds. "It was the right direction."

It had taken a long time to get there, but after this breakthrough, *Horizon*'s thematic development started to move very fast. But it raised a new problem. De Jonge and van Beek had worked together before to write *Killzone* games, but this altogether bigger game presented new challenges and they found their original idea for the story just didn't mesh with the creative direction the game was taking. They looked at open-world games they admired and hired John Gonzalez, creative design lead of *Fallout: New Vegas*. He tore the game apart over the six months he spent re-writing it, but kept to the original core ideas: a female lead living in a post-apocalyptic world dominated by machines. Now, though, the story would be about a woman called Aloy searching for her mother. He fleshed out the identity of the tribe she came from, as well as wider things about the world, often affecting the game's design in the process. As the machines became more animalistic, the team figured they'd have predator types feeding on herbivores, but Gonzalez's story had them as a single faction. He also nixed horses. Aloy was originally meant to ride one, but since anyone can ride a horse and she was meant to be extraordinary, he decided that she'd uniquely be able to hack machines and ride them instead.

When *Shadow Fall* released in November 2013, *Horizon*'s 14-strong development team was suddenly joined by 200 new colleagues, and work was meant to begin in earnest. "There were two problems we had to conquer," says character art director **Dan Calvert**, whose team's job was to populate the world with its people. "The first was that we had to make so much *stuff*. And the second, which is literally the worst to have in combination, was that these 200 people, all with ideas and crazy ambitions, were in an environment where there were loads of ideas and not many decisions." But rather than wait for clear answers to their questions, Calvert's solution was to simply start making things. "We got stuck in on day one," he says, "and never really stopped."

Though they had a strong story backbone, Aloy's tribe and the Carja only had the start of a visual identity, while the Banuk and Oseram were completely blank slates. Calvert and his team began to research methodically; their clothing would communicate who these people were. The Nora had to feel standoffish, the kind of people who might make Aloy an outcast, but on the other hand they had to be appealing. They were meant to be hunter-gatherers, so research initially nudged them towards wearing animal furs, but when large animals were removed from the game, the Nora suddenly had nothing to wear. OK, so now they were machine hunters, and they'd wear machine parts instead of fur. "But integrating machine parts was extremely difficult," says Calvert. "We spent literally months on that."

It was important that there was some kind of reason why the Nora would use these parts, and it had to contrast with the way other tribes would use them. For the Banuk, machines had spiritual power, so they'd use their parts as totems which imbued them with the machines' power. Among the Nora, the matriarchs would use parts as jewellery to show their status, and for hunters it was functional armour. Moreover, the Nora lacked the technology to cut and shape the parts, so they could only be worn as whole components. The more advanced Carja, on the other hand, could shape them. These rules introduced challenges. If the machine parts fitted the characters too well they'd look too deliberate. "The phrase we disparagingly used was 'techno Viking'," Calvert says. But if they looked too ad hoc, they'd say it looked too Mad Max. They took parts out of the machines' 3D models and kitbashed them together in order to strike a balance between the two.

Development continued, *Horizon*'s size achieved through smart decisions. Calvert's team started out making generic characters; only later did it move on to the bespoke ones that players tend to notice. Quests were ranked, so important ones were given time and attention while the more trivial ones were allowed to be more freewheeling and avoid distracting the game's leads. The game was announced at E3 2015 to a response which immediately focused on the same elements into which Guerrilla had invested so much work: its scale, its machines, its heroine. A year after its March 2017 launch, it had sold 7.6 million copies. The risk paid off, and has left Guerrilla stronger, and not simply for having made a hit. "People are less nervous when we see a new concept or pitch in a new genre, because now we know that *Horizon* was scary and a big risk but worth the effort," says de Jonge. "We're probably more flexible for the future."

"When I was working on *Shadow Fall*, *Horizon* looked like a dream project," says Calvert. "A premise that gets everyone excited, crazy-ambitious and yet big enough that every one of 200 people could put a part of themselves in it. It was big and scary, but it was a dream." ■

Q&A



Mathijs de Jonge
Game director

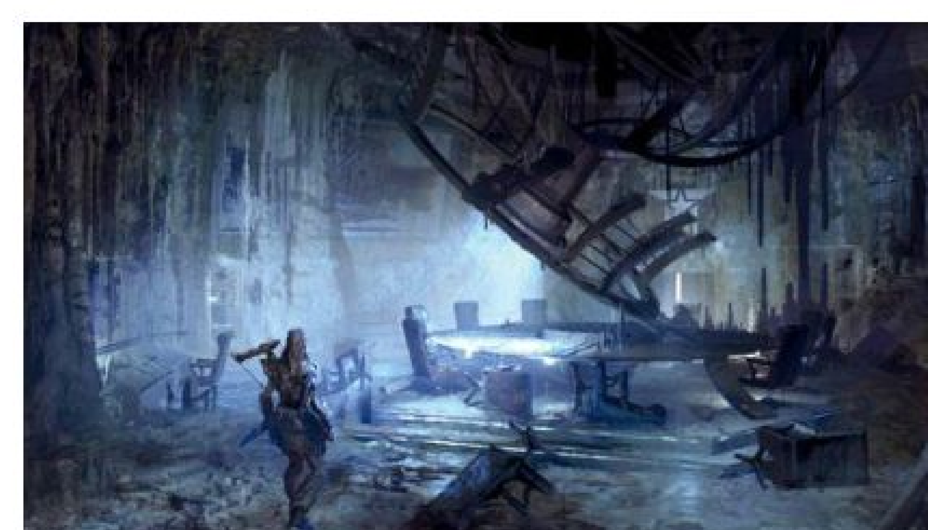
Why did you decide to have a female lead character?
Aloy was in the initial pitch, and the way she was presented was more like Sarah Connor from Terminator or Ripley from Aliens, so she was a very strong female lead. After many years of *Killzone* games, with stereotypical male Marine leads, we felt it was a nice change of direction. But there were doubts along the way, for sure, like Shu's [Sony's Worldwide Studios president Shuhei Yoshida]. We explored many directions for her; it wasn't easy to shape her, but I'm glad we didn't give her up.

How did you learn the craft of open-world game design?
We're not only developers, but gamers, too, and we play a lot of open-world games. It was our desire to go towards this kind of game development because as designers we felt like we wanted to expand our capabilities. In playing open-world games you get some references, of course, but we also realised we needed to hire experts who had made them before, like our lead quest designer [David Ford, who worked on *EverQuest* and *The Elder Scrolls Online*].

How did you approach designing the game's beginning?
We felt we had to gradually open up the world and slowly soak players into it. The story starts with Aloy as a baby; it's very slow and we wondered if players might not be patient, but we needed to tell this story right as the first in a new franchise, and to get this attachment to Aloy. The game at the opening is narrow, and slowly opens up, giving tastes of the open world, so we can direct what mechanics are used and which machines we reveal.















1 Ben Erdt's design for a Banuk shaman's headdress uses machine parts as a way for him to embody the machines' power. 2 Avad, the leader of the Carja tribe, wears many rare parts to express strength and status. 3 Vegetation is procedurally generated according to rules designed by Guerrilla's artists to define patterns of growth dependent on region, distance to water and many other factors. 4 Aloy's many sets of clothing generally express the Nora's cultural values, using machine parts in a functional way. 5 Guerrilla had predator machines feeding on herbivore types, until the story made them all part of one faction. 6 Aloy is a child when the game begins, letting Guerrilla teach the player her abilities just as she's learning them

STUDIO PROFILE

DAKKO DAKKO

Established in Wales but made in Japan, the two-man studio still daring to embrace the unconventional

By Chris Schilling



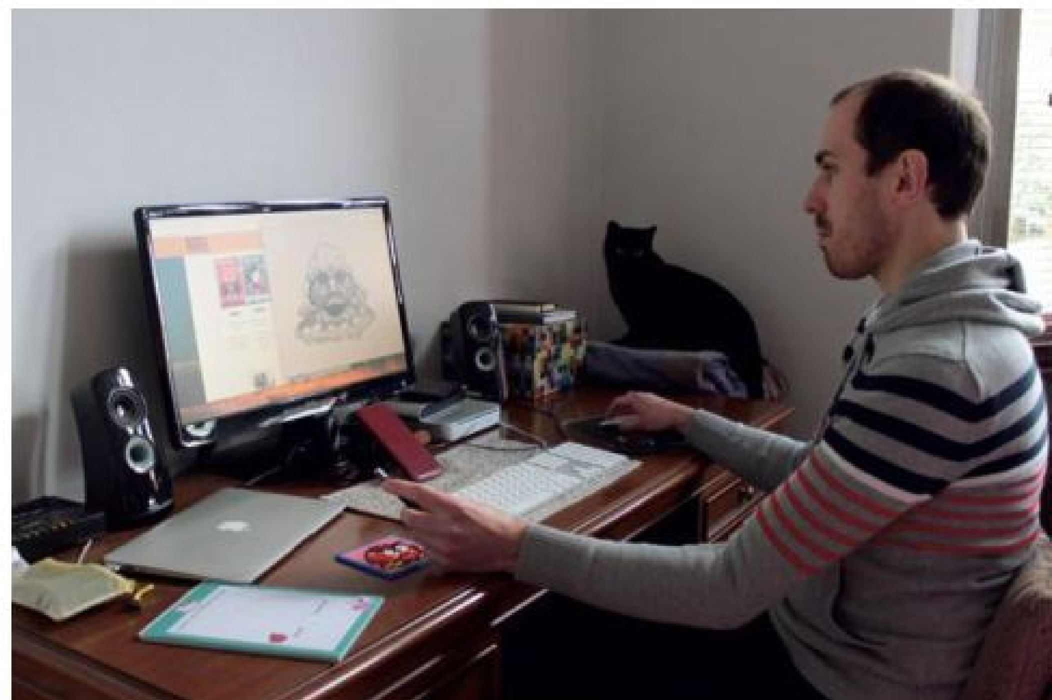


Founded 2010
Employees 2
Key staff Rhodri Broadbent (founder), Kieren Griffiths (studio manager), Gary Lucken (art), Samuel Baker (sound/music), Dale Thomas (programming)
URL dakkodakko.com
Selected softography *The 2D Adventures Of Rotating Octopus Character*, *Floating Cloud God Saves The Pilgrims*, *Scram Kitty And His Buddy On Rails*, *Pop-Up Pilgrims*
Current projects TBA

An impulsive gift-shop purchase was the unlikely spark behind Welsh micro-studio Dakko Dakko's 2011 debut. Founder **Rhodri Broadbent** had just finished a four-year spell at Tokyo's Q-Games when he and studio manager Kieren Griffiths took a trip to Osaka Aquarium, where a cute octopus toy caught his eye. Before the two left Japan and moved back to Cardiff, they sat down to discuss ideas for what would be Dakko Dakko's first game – and quickly realised they had their tentacled protagonist. Broadbent had already been struck by the thought of making a game based around a rotating object after enjoying Link's spinner in *Zelda: Twilight Princess*, and put the two together. "I told a friend I was leaving Japan to make a game that could basically be summed up as 'the 2D adventures of rotating octopus character'," Broadbent recalls. "I hope you call it that," was the friend's response – and so he did.

Broadbent says that certain "sociological and political issues" had, in part, accelerated the pair's decision to leave Japan, but he'd been encouraged to work as part of a smaller team during his time at Q-Games. Accustomed to larger projects such as *Fable* and *Star Fox Command*, Broadbent acquired a taste for the more dynamic development processes behind the *Pixeljunk* games. "When you're small, you have the chance to change things on the hoof – you can be much more reactive, because you don't have management structures or production structures," he says. "You don't have to have big meetings; you can just try something out and make it work. And yeah, in the right team that can still happen with a big company. But having seen *Pixeljunk*, I was really excited by the idea of being able to make and publish whatever we wanted in such a short time."

Self-publishing was a somewhat new and exciting development at the time, and Broadbent and Griffiths sensed an opportunity. Having worked closely with Sony on the *Pixeljunk* games, Broadbent already had strong ties to one platform holder, and with the PlayStation Minis service set up to capitalise on the portable-gaming boom, Dakko Dakko had the ideal home for its first game. "Sony was reaching out to developers of all sizes, so it was very much a 'right place, right time' kind of thing," he says. The pair needed a little outside help to get the game made: programmer Dale Thomas came on board, alongside Samuel Baker, who provided music and sound. Gary Lucken – whom Broadbent had first met on the **Edge** Usenet newsgroup, of all places – supplied much of the game's art, and all three have been regular collaborators since.



Dakko Dakko's home is in Penarth, just on the outskirts of the Welsh capital. It temporarily relocated to an office in central Cardiff to house *Scram Kitty*'s larger team

Dakko Dakko might have left Japan behind, but the culture is still in the studio's blood, and it informed the follow-up, which once again indulged Broadbent's fondness for long titles. "We travelled a lot in Japan, and we lived in Kyoto, so there was a lot of creative inspiration every day, really," Griffiths says. Paintings and statues of the Bodhisattva in a nearby Buddhist Temple, along with a visit to Japan's smallest island Shikoku ("People go on a pilgrimage there to visit 88 shrines," Broadbent says) duly supplied that inspiration, and *Floating Cloud God Saves The Pilgrims* began to take shape. Broadbent's love of portable hardware meant it was destined for PSP, while the notion of having characters representing a life bar had long interested him: "I always try to remove the UI from games wherever possible, so that it's organically obvious what's going on. And so the Pilgrims walking along the ground was something that came from that."

"WHEN YOU'RE SMALL, YOU HAVE THE CHANCE TO CHANGE THINGS ON THE HOOF – YOU CAN BE MORE REACTIVE"

Japan's ancient culture may have inspired *Floating Cloud God*'s theme and aesthetic, but it's clear from the studio's catalogue that their former home has had a bigger impact on the way its games are designed. "That's certainly the case, yes," Broadbent admits. "Though growing up I was very much a computer-game player rather than a console-game player, and I still have a sort of psychological distinction in my head between the two. Whereas Kieren grew up with console games." As such, Broadbent hadn't had much direct exposure to Japanese games ("beyond knock-offs of *Donkey Kong*, and that sort of thing") until he bought a SNES as a teenager. He quickly became besotted with the likes of *Super Mario World* and *A Link To The Past* – he affectionately calls it "Zelda 3" – which first prompted thoughts of travelling to Japan.

It was almost inevitable, then, that Dakko Dakko would eventually make a game for Nintendo hardware. That game was 2014's *Scram Kitty And His Buddy On Rails*, a more ambitious concept with a staff count to match – the studio's ranks swelled to a whopping "six or seven", by Broadbent's reckoning. He was keen to revisit the idea of attaching a protagonist to rails, but on this occasion opted to build a top-down shooter around it. The studio had already approached Nintendo about porting its two previous games to 3DS, but then Broadbent saw Wii U and fell in love. "The intimacy of playing a handheld game but with the power of a home console behind it? I thought, 'Yes, that's where we should be next'." With prior experience working with two screens on *Star Fox Command*, Broadbent was hoping to use the GamePad's unique functionality in ways few others had really considered: "The idea of having a 'broadcast view', as we called it, where the TV would show a different image, was very appealing to us, so we quickly moved in that direction."

Scram Kitty was warmly received, and later ported to Vita – obviously without the dual-screen features. Still, it's hard not to imagine how well it might have done had Broadbent sat on the ▶





Broadbent built a bespoke engine for *Pop-Up Pilgrims* to ensure Gary Lucken's art remained crisp and detailed in close-up. "We ditched a 3DS prototype for the promise of VR," he says. "I won't tell you about it, because then you'll want it to exist"

idea for a few years and waited for Switch. He laughs when we ask if he feels like a victim of bad timing. "Actually, it was very nice to be early on Wii U and it generated a lot of interest," he says. "And we could still bring *Scram Kitty* in some form to Switch. But certainly we've always chosen to target platforms because we felt like the software and hardware would meld well together, rather than because the commercial viability of the platform was already self-evident. That hasn't always been our biggest driving factor."

And Dakko Dakko's experience with Wii U would soon pay off in surprising fashion. At GDC 2011, Broadbent met Simogo's Simon Flesser, and the two hit it off immediately, developing a lasting friendship that resulted in Broadbent voicing a character in the exceptional *Device 6*. Flesser expressed an interest in bringing his studio's previous game, folkloric chiller *Year Walk*, to Wii U; Broadbent, fresh from finishing *Scram Kitty*, was ready and able to lend his expertise. "It was a chance to [explore] everything we'd learned but not necessarily implemented in *Scram Kitty* – like using the gyro and more use of the touchscreen to enhance what everyone seems to think is a really good version of a really good game," he says. Nintendo clearly thought so too, getting involved in the direction of the port, and even publishing it in Japan. "It was such a fun and hugely collaborative project," Broadbent says. "It was lovely to work with Simogo, and it's always lovely to work with Nintendo."

But it was Sony hardware to which Dakko Dakko was drawn for its most recent game. *Pop-Up Pilgrims* returns to the world of *Floating Cloud God*, though here its setting is rendered in thin layers, redolent – as the title suggests – of a pop-up book. As with *Scram Kitty*, it's designed to entertain players and onlookers alike, offering a different perspective to anyone watching on the big screen. "VR can be quite isolating, in that the player has the screen to themselves and no one else can see what they can – except for mirroring, which can be a bit disorientating," he says. "We were keen to have the TV showing something so another player can participate, even if it's just commenting on what's going on. Or, in the case of *Pop-Up Pilgrims*, controlling a second character." The tech, however, presented some unexpected challenges for a game that was initially going to hew much closer to the original. "There was going to be a lot of shooting and moving between layers," Griffiths adds. "But as time went on, we realised that VR is a trickier beast than we first thought, especially with issues of nausea – we were playing a scrolling game and it was making us feel slightly sick. So we decided to move from a shooter to a more puzzle-focused, problem-solving kind of game."

"WE'RE CHECKING ON THE STATE OF THE JAPANESE MARKET, BECAUSE IT'S REALLY DIFFERENT TO EUROPE AND AMERICA"

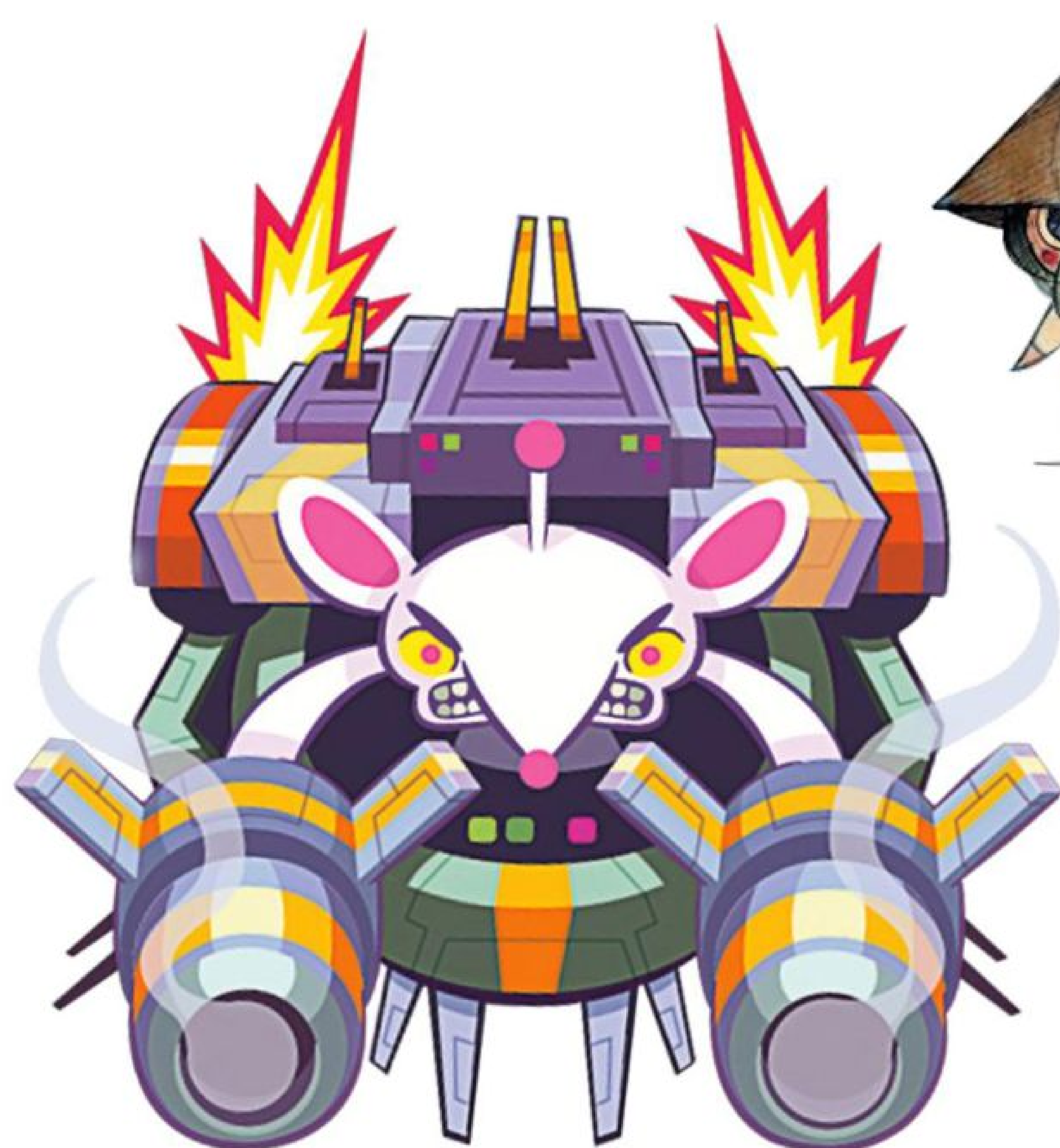
It may be exclusive to a Sony platform, but *Pop-Up Pilgrims* is evidence of a disruptive streak that seems very Nintendo, with Dakko Dakko wilfully heading in the opposite direction to the majority of VR developers. "Instead of going with 'big VR' as I think most people have, we went with 'small VR', in that the world is close to you, and the game is entirely about the head-tracking capabilities of the headset," he says. "It's questionable as to whether or not that's exactly what the market was looking for. But at the time, it was good to take on that experiment and we're very proud of what we achieved with it."

Though creative, rather than commercial, considerations have driven Dakko Dakko's output so far, Broadbent does admit that the ratio may be changing slightly. He doesn't regret working with VR and certainly not with Wii U – he even hints that, under the right conditions, a future Simogo collaboration is entirely possible. "Whether or not we can just put creative concerns first or business concerns first is *slightly* changing as time goes on, because games are getting so much bigger that they simply require more money to make them," he says. "Obviously you can't keep running a business if it isn't commercially successful, but we're very proud that we've kept going for eight years now."

As such, the studio currently finds itself between projects – though Broadbent says he's hardly short of ideas, and that it's rare for him not to have a variety of prototypes on the go. But in the meantime, the two are taking a short sabbatical, with a return to Japan on the immediate horizon. It isn't just for pleasure, mind. "We're going to see about publishing our games in Japan, which we haven't so far," Griffiths tells us. "And also checking on the state of the Japanese market, because it's really different to Europe and America – their taste for games is so radically different, particularly recently, that we're interested to get the perspective of our friends who work in Kyoto." It turns out you can take the Welshmen out of Japan, but you can't take Japan out of the Welshmen – and you sense Dakko Dakko wouldn't really want it any other way. ■











1 Artist Gary Lucken and Broadbent first bonded over a love of *Gunstar Heroes*. *Pop-Up Pilgrims*' colourful demons were designed to provide a link between stages. "Gary is incredibly good at making cute demons," Broadbent says. 2 A Lucken concept for 2012's *Floating Cloud God Saves The Pilgrims*, which made its way to Vita the following year. 3 The 'scram' in *Scram Kitty* is a Welsh term used to describe a severe scratch: fitting for a game that frequently bares its claws







PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Skyrim Xbox One X
With much of the UK hit by an unseasonably heavy dumping of snow, thoughts naturally turned to Bethesda's immaculately wintry RPG. Yet one thing held us back: the thought of playing through that blessed opening section with the dragon for the 50th time. Praise Dibella, then, for mod support on consoles, and specifically Live Another Life. After answering a few simple questions we begin the game as a wealthy – and well-levelled – Solitude landowner.

Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle Switch
Our sole point of frustration with Ubisoft's charming spin on *XCOM* is the restrictions the developer places on team building. Branding should never intrude upon a game's design, but the insistence that Mario always be team leader, and that the other two slots must contain of at least one Rabbid, are clear signs of corporate politics getting in the way. Rabbid Mario's our team's MVP, admittedly, but it still doesn't quite sit right with us.

Part-Time UFO Switch
It's been a good month for the House of Kirby, with Hal's mobile debut belatedly making its western bow. It imagines a world where a sentient UFO Catcher finds itself seeking work outside the arcade, using its two-pronged crane to variously catch fish, prepare salads and assemble cheerleader pyramids. With three bonus objectives per stage, its challenge belies its cute looks, while its controls are as good as virtual thumbsticks can possibly get. Delightful.



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Talking 'bout an evolution

It's been five-and-a-half years since *FTL: Faster Than Light*, which is just about the only evidence that developer Subset Games suffered from second-album syndrome in the making of *Into The Breach* (p108). Subset's twist of genius this time is to give the player an unprecedented amount of information – including the enemy's next moves and actions – and use that as an excuse to ratchet the difficulty up to *FTL*-like levels, and arguably beyond.

What Subset has done is exploit a luxury available almost exclusively to small independent studios. Yes, it could no doubt have banged out an *FTL* sequel in a couple of years, but it didn't need to, and instead chose to follow a new, more creatively fulfilling path. In doing so, it could avoid a question posed constantly in meeting rooms at large studios the world over – and an issue explored at length in this issue's cover story. How do you evolve a long-running series?



This issue yields a few answers to this thorny topic, albeit with mixed results. *Metal Gear Survive* (p116) sees Konami, quite understandably, decide that its only option after the departure of Hideo Kojima is to pivot the series in an entirely different direction. It's not a very good one, but you can see the intent. And *Kirby Star Allies* (p112) is the product of Nintendo realising that the titular pink puffball is famous for being other characters, rather than just himself, so he might as well share top billing with them.

Not all series must evolve, per se; what matters is a clear vision for what comes next, something that's somewhat lacking from *Ni No Kuni II* (p104). This entirely serviceable sequel simply lacks a hook, its developers instead chucking a load of stuff at the whiteboard and hoping some of it sticks. It is not the worst game of this issue, but it is certainly among the least inspiring – and all for a lack of clarity.

Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom

Developer Level-5
Publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format PC (tested), PS4
Release Out now

For a brief moment, we wondered if we'd been sent the wrong review code by mistake. But no, *Ni No Kuni II* really does open with a scene where a presidential motorcade, speeding towards a city, is beaten to its destination by a ballistic missile. As it streaks by, the grey-templed leader gulps in horror. The shockwave from the explosion that follows reaches the convoy, leaving him sprawled and grievously wounded on the ground – at which point he's suddenly whisked off to the fantasy kingdom of Ding Dong Dell. It took a family tragedy for young Oliver to get there in the original; without the guiding hand of Studio Ghibli, you may wonder if Level-5 is adopting the 'bigger, better, more traumatic' approach for its successor. And yet before long you're on familiar ground: there's a tear-streaked goodbye, a panoramic Joe Hisaishi score, and, after a few hours or so, a Welsh-accented sidekick. That's *Revenant Kingdom* in microcosm: it certainly isn't afraid to take a few unexpected turns, but neither is it fully prepared to make a clean break with the past.

Still, as sequels go, there are a few surprising structural differences. For a start, the original game's awkward combat system, which with hindsight mistook complexity for depth, has been entirely overhauled. The Pokémon-like creatures which fought on your behalf are gone – though in truth they're only missed for the quality of Ghibli's designs – with human characters taking charge in their place. Outside a sluggish dodge on the left bumper, the realtime combat has zip and dynamism, with a greater sense of impact than some of its lightweight peers. It's the usual mix of light and strong attacks mapped to face buttons, while a squeeze of the trigger opens a skill palette, letting you unleash magic-infused specials. Regular attacks not only refill your magic meter, but contribute to your weapon's Zing stat – a kind of affinity gauge that increases damage and even enhances skill moves when maxed out. You can equip three weapons at once; by default, the game will switch to the one with the highest Zing, but you can swap manually if you're carrying an elemental weapon that might be better-suited to your current opponent. There's also a ranged option, bound to the right bumper, which can either be charged or used to fire weaker shots while dashing. Equip something half-decent in this slot and you're laughing: fights can be attritional if you rely on it exclusively, but if you're low on health it's a handy way of chipping away from a safe distance while you heal up.

And don't worry if you miss the monsters. Extra help is at hand in the form of the Higgledies, friendly little sprites that act independently in battle and can be called upon occasionally. They'll form circles on the battlefield: step inside and you can tap a button to make them transform into a giant cannon, create a local restorative spell, or launch powerful dark curses at enemies. You can even use them to enhance your own magic attacks, assuming you're not interrupted while charging them up. In truth, you'll only need them during boss battles; by the time the first circle has appeared, the fight will be all but over. Even so, it's nice to have another option without being overwhelmed by choice.

The original game's awkward combat system has been entirely overhauled



This violence may be a useful means to an end, but peace is the game's ultimate goal. As interloper Roland, who in this world looks a good 20 years younger than in ours, you're charged with helping recently-deposed king Evan build a new kingdom. Young and desperately naive, Evan hopes he can unite the various lands with the cutely-named Declaration of Interdependence treaty. But to do that he'll need to prove himself to each kingdom's leader. At which point, the game suddenly turns into a simplistic RTS. Here, you must guide four units into battle, rotating them into advantageous positions according to a familiar rock-paper-scissors weapon triangle of swords, spears and axes. Of all things, these skirmishes are reminiscent of *Yakuza 6*'s clan encounters, in the sense that victory is often a case of simply throwing as many units at a problem as you can. The result is entertainingly messy if hardly blessed with systemic depth; the only reason you'll pursue them more often than the story forces you to is for the secondary benefits to your kingdom.

And that's because *Ni No Kuni* is now a city-builder of sorts, too. Once your settlement, optimistically named Evermore, is established, you'll place down a range of facilities – from spell stores and weaponsmiths to farms and mines and even a music hall to listen to the game's soundtrack – in fixed positions before assigning specific personnel to run them. These can research a variety of topics that, in theory, should make things easier for you in battle. Find the right people for the right jobs and you'll cut down the research time – you can use money earned from the kingdom's stores to speed things along in a manner which could easily have been used to push microtransactions – but for the most useful topics there's usually a significant wait involved.

Some topics have extra requirements – an individual skill, for example, which requires you to find the person in the world that possesses that skill, thus nudging you towards recruitment side quests. Materials harvested from farms and mines encourage you to return, with your coffers filling up all too quickly. Disappointingly, in some cases, you'll realise you're being sold basic functionality: you'll need to research increased walking speed, for example, if you want field exploration to feel less like you're wading through treacle. All in all, it captures the effort involved in maintaining a flourishing kingdom perhaps a little too well.

It does effectively allow you to specialise, however, should you choose to focus your attention on the ▶



LEFT You can switch your party leader if you fancy a change from Roland or Evan: having spent dozens of hours with the hammer in *Monster Hunter*, we naturally warmed to pirate captain Batu and his arsenal of mallets and axes.
MAIN Looking like a sunny Mediterranean coastal town, Hydropolis seems idyllic – though you'll soon discover the local populace is under surveillance from its paranoid ruler.
BOTTOM Most buildings in your kingdom can be levelled up, opening more personnel slots which, when filled, will significantly reduce research waiting times





ABOVE The inhabitants of Capstan-upon-Hull – no prizes for guessing what the major industry is there – appear to hail from Yorkshire. Exclamations accompany each line during exchanges; it's a pity more of it isn't voiced



buildings that most benefit your playstyle. As does something Level-5 calls the Tactic Tweaker. This menu widget lets you invest the points each of your party earns from levelling up in a range of ways. You can choose to boost your attack strength against either slimy or hard-bodied enemies – though not both at once – or pick certain elemental buffs at the cost of others. Any points you've invested can be rejigged at any time, so you can adjust these to suit the types of enemy you'll be facing next: making fire-breathing reptiles fall at your feet much quicker, or ensuring flitting fairies won't confuse you so easily. This extends to post-battle rewards, so you can decide between an increase in experience points or rare materials depending on whether you're looking to grind levels or are seeking out better gear.

Though those keen to find the most efficient build can tinker to their heart's content, in practice, you should be able to get by just fine without fiddling about too much. As with so many RPGs, there are dozens of options that eventually have a cumulative effect, but individually their impact is negligible. Any time spent improving an existing weapon is often wasted when you can find a much better one within the next half-hour of exploration. It doesn't often pay to stay loyal to a favourite: simply switch to the three among your current arsenal with the highest attack power or most potent magical effect, use the character you're most comfortable with, avoid getting hit too often and you'll never see the Game Over screen.

Such issues are hardly exclusive to this particular RPG, in fairness, and few of those have *Revenant Kingdom*'s range. One mission alone, which requires you to obtain a library card, invites you to recruit someone



A NEW LEAF

The very nature of RPGs encourages you to look forward: you're always aiming for higher stats and better kit, eyes focused on the horizon and the next stop on your journey, your achievements little more than a series of ticks on a steadily lengthening 'quests completed' list. *Ni No Kuni II* aims to remedy that with a social network called Leafbook that offers commentary from strangers and NPCs you've met on current and past events. You'll find useful hints about monsters and happenings elsewhere, and amusing reflections from party members on recent triumphs. It may seem a minor addition, but it deepens your connection to a world that both reacts to your presence, and that stretches well beyond your own adventures.

While there are fewer cutscenes, the animation matches the standard of its predecessor. The chibi style adopted during the field exploration scenes is curious – perhaps it was deemed necessary for the big army encounters

well-versed in magic, press them into employment at your kingdom's spellworks, and research a spell to build a bridge to obtain a red rose on the other side of a chasm. And that's just the first of three items. Next, you'll fight a boss, then cook an omelette for a hungry commander, before recruiting two more soldiers, impressing one by beating three monsters, and the other by handing over a rare item. Enlist them to your army, and after defeating a rival you'll finally have the last object you need. The jokey pay-off might elicit more groans than laughs, but this is basically an elaborate fetch quest that rarely feels like one.

That's partly down to some excellent world building. Though Studio Ghibli's general absence is felt in the comparative lack of voiced cutscenes, Hisaishi's score and Yoshiyuki Momose's character designs bring just enough of the studio's whimsy to an earnestly hopeful fable, while the writing adds a pinch of wit and mystery to prevent all the 'happily ever after' stuff becoming overbearingly mawkish. The diversity of settings and activities means that the pace rarely seems to slacken.

With odd spatial puzzle interludes and multi-floor dungeons where the threat level builds the longer you spend inside, *Revenant Kingdom* isn't short of ideas, even if many of them have been seen before. The one thing you could say it does very well, in fact, is the way it knits together everything it does competently. As for how it compares to its predecessor, there's really no better summary than Roland's response to Evan when asked to describe his home: "I guess it's ahead of this world in some ways, and behind in others."

7

Post Script

How Ni No Kuni II highlights the challenge of evolving the JRPG

We love a good JRPG here at **Edge** – not for nothing do we have one on the cover this month. With *Dragon Quest XI*, Square Enix is seeking western success by sticking to the script in a metaphorical sense while changing it in a literal one. Its localisation is set to follow the lead of the eighth instalment, with a broad range of regional accents – understandably so, since that remains the series' most popular entry overseas. Yes, it's a steadfastly traditional example of the form, but in Japan that's exactly what sells. So why go to the bother of changing a winning formula?

Plenty of other games have proven the wisdom of such an approach, the original *Ni No Kuni* being one of them. Outside its awkward hybrid combat, it was a defiantly orthodox JRPG. As with the likes of *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey*, Microsoft's early attempts to convince a reluctant Japanese audience to invest in Xbox 360, it sought to recapture the genre's glory years. The success, relatively speaking, of all three suggested the old-fashioned style still appealed to western players. The *Persona* series, meanwhile, took three games to land upon a recipe that appealed to a global palate. Since then, it's ladled on the stylistic flourishes while holding fast to the structural trappings that turned it from a minor cult favourite to a breakout hit.

Not every series has the luxury of sticking to its guns. As development costs (and team sizes) spiral upwards in accordance with technology's inexorable forward march, many JRPGs need to work harder to court western audiences. For its sequel, then, Level-5 had a much tougher job, not least given the absence of the first game's major selling point. Its answer is to throw just about every idea it can cram in there to see what sticks. *Ni No Kuni II*'s realtime combat is decent enough, and its city-building element is perfectly fine, offering a long-term hook beyond the story. And RPGs of this nature *need* to be built for longevity, if only for the value perception when put next to western blockbusters that either come with sprawling worlds offering dozens of hours of play and expansive season-pass plans, or are designed as services to keep players coming back over months and even years.

If it's easy to detect a hint of desperation in the variety of ways *Revenant Kingdom* tries to compete with its peers from overseas, that's symptomatic of a genre experiencing growing pains as it attempts to evolve into something new and different. Just look at *Final Fantasy XV* for further evidence: the most famous and enduring JRPG series took inspiration from east and west, but struggled to make it all cohere. Even with development spanning close to a decade, it launched in a state that made it look like an Early Access game. It's been patched up, expanded, and vastly improved since, but few publishers have the resources that Square Enix does, and you imagine the time and expense might not have been worth its while.

It's easy to detect a hint of desperation in the ways Revenant Kingdom tries to compete with its overseas peers



Even Nintendo has had mixed success when it comes to reinventing the JRPG. *Xenoblade Chronicles* is a strong contender for the last true great in this genre, but that's already coming up to its eighth anniversary, and its successors have laboured to match it: *X* was a bold but flawed reinvention, while *Chronicles 2* was a disappointing retread. The *Paper Mario* games have evolved into a story-based action-puzzle hybrid. GameCube entry *The Thousand-Year Door* is still widely regarded as the series' peak, mainly because Nintendo hasn't even attempted to top it. Alphadream's *Mario And Luigi* series, meanwhile, remains bound to portable hardware: even the latest entry, not due until next year, has been earmarked for 3DS rather than Switch – and that's a remake.

The handheld market, of course, is one area where the genre has flourished. Ever since portable devices became the dominant force in Japan with the DS and PSP, we've seen a number of games offering brand new ideas (*The World Ends With You*'s influence spread well beyond its modest sales) or subtle reinventions of old ones (*Bravely Default* lets the player grind or experiment with job combinations at their own pace). As two of the most popular current series make their way to Switch, we're keen to see whether they stick or twist: *Pokémon* continues to pull in huge numbers with refinement rather than revolution, while *Fire Emblem* belatedly broke out of its niche by doing a solid impression of an anime dating sim.

Some would still consider the latter series more of a turn-based strategy than a JRPG, but then this is a genre whose influence can be felt in many other types of game: it's harder to name a popular multiplayer shooter or free-to-play mobile phenomenon that *doesn't* let you gain experience and level up these days. Maybe it's time to accept that the genre has splintered, and that JRPG isn't a particularly useful label anymore, beyond describing a roleplaying game that happens to be made in Japan. You could easily class the likes of *Breath Of The Wild*, *Nier: Automata* and the *Yakuza* games as JRPGs. *Monster Hunter: World*, too, which has just become Capcom's biggest-selling game ever. And somehow we've got this far without even mentioning the *Souls* series. In other words, the JRPG has been evolving under our noses the entire time: those who say its heyday was a long time ago simply need to be more open-minded about a genre that still seems in rude health. ■

Into The Breach

Your squad of three mechs is always outnumbered. Its duty to defend the cities of humankind against the swarming Vek is overwhelming. Or so it seems. While the numbers are always against you, on your side is a tool that evens the odds: you always know exactly what the Vek are going to do next. This simple idea, of perfect knowledge in the face of the apocalypse, has produced a game of sublime ingenuity, one which delivers the thrill of feeling like you've just pulled humanity from the brink over and over again.

Into The Breach is the long-awaited second release from Subset Games, the maker of break-out Roguelike space adventure *FTL: Faster Than Light*. The two games share a good deal in common, but they're very different. While *FTL* was an object lesson in team management amid interstellar crises, *Into The Breach* is a tactics game about mech management amid Earthbound ones. It's clearly taken inspiration from the tactics greats, most evidently *Advance Wars*, but brings many ideas of its own, particularly Roguelike progression as you fight five battles on each of four islands, gathering strength before facing a final battle.

Each mission takes place on an 8x8 grid of tiles and across just five turns. It starts with several Vek, giant insects which burst from the ground: your object is to survive. Each turn, the Vek will move to attack, the interface clearing showing what they'll hit and what damage they'll deliver. But survival isn't about keeping your mechs safe. Instead, it's about defending cities. For each one that's destroyed you'll lose one Power Grid point, and when you've none left, the Vek win.

While its presentation and logic is very *Advance Wars*, the way the pressure rises, forcing you to make hard choices, makes *Into The Breach* feel more like a pixellated board game. You will always have several priorities in mind when it's your mechs' turn to act, all mediated by the threats the Vek are imposing. Cities are your prime concern, since at maximum you can only have seven points in your Power Grid. You are, therefore, never more than seven cities away from game over.

But battles also present you with certain objectives, such as defending a speeding train or ensuring that a particularly dangerous Vek survives, and when completed, they'll grant certain rewards. They can be Power Grid points to top up your supply. But others are vital for improving your squad so it can stand up to the rising challenge of later battles. Reputation is a currency you can spend on new weapons and other upgrades, while Reactor Cores will power up your mechs' abilities.

In battle, then, you'll constantly weigh up destroying a dam in return for Reputation against leaving a city open to attack. And you'll also have your mechs on your mind. When destroyed, a mech is only out for the rest of the battle, returning fully healed for the next, but its pilot will be dead. Pilots, which are freely swappable between mechs, earn XP as they make kills, and as they level up will gain pilot-specific extra HP and movement, and often special abilities, such as damage-mitigating armour. Without a pilot, then, your mech will be less powerful. Will you prioritise a city or your mech? Are your immediate needs more important than your long-term goals? There's a great deal to consider, and it constantly shifts as the Vek set up for the next turn.

Developer/publisher Subset Games
Format PC
Release Out now

It delivers the thrill of feeling like you've just pulled humanity from the brink over and over again



IT'S ABOUT TIME
When a campaign ends, you get to bring back one of your surviving pilots for your next run, complete with abilities they've earned. *Into The Breach* explains this in terms of time travel, with you taking unlimited attempts to save humanity and using what you've learned to better counter the Vek next time. It's also reflected in its undo system. In an effort to reduce misclicks and give you a chance to explore your options, you can undo any move command you give your mechs, up until one makes an attack. That's because attacks will so often shift enemies, rendering each turn a chain of causality which freely undoing could entangle. And if you really mess up, you can entirely reset a turn, but only once per battle.

None of this would work if your mechs weren't so capable. And they're loaded with fantastic weapons. At the outset of a campaign run you'll choose a squad; new squads, each tuned for a different playstyle, are unlocked by performing special achievements during play, but only one is available when you start the game, the Rift Walkers. They consist of a Combat Mech armed with Titan Fist, a powerful punch that pushes enemies back, an Artillery Mech with Artemis Artillery, which does low damage but pushes units on adjacent tiles, and Cannon Mech, with Taurus Cannon, which shoots in a straight line and pushes its target back.

With this toolset, you'll work wonders. Every turn is a puzzle box in which you'll figure out combinations of moves that deal with the Vek's next threat. Your Artillery Mech fires into an empty tile, pushing one bug that was going to attack a city into water for an instant kill; one into range of your Combat Mech, which punches it into a mountain; and another into the firing line of the remaining bug, blocking a shot which would have destroyed the train. The creative space in which you have to act is wide open, but it's held in check by your need to protect your cities, achieve your objectives, and tend to your mechs.

As you buy new weapons and power up your squad, the possibility space widens further. Roles change: the Charge Mech starts out with a powerful attack that does damage to itself, but give it a pilot with the Armor ability and it becomes almost unstoppable. But single strategies rarely win the game, as certain levels present unique challenges, such as flooding or unit-destroying airstrikes, which can both complicate plans and inspire new ones. And all the while, the Vek's capabilities rise. By the final levels, you'll face a furious threat that lobs explosive bio-bombs, adding even more targets to destroy. It can often feel too much for a party of three to cover, and yet there's somehow always a way, if only you can work it out.

That's where *Into The Breach* excels: in the cold sweat of attempting a desperate last plan; when a calculated risk opens a glimmer of hope; when a decision to power an ability four battles ago saves the day. *Into The Breach* balances its action on a knife-edge while giving you extraordinary latitude to make choices, an astonishing feat of focused game design with the capacity to enthral as few tactics games have ever managed.

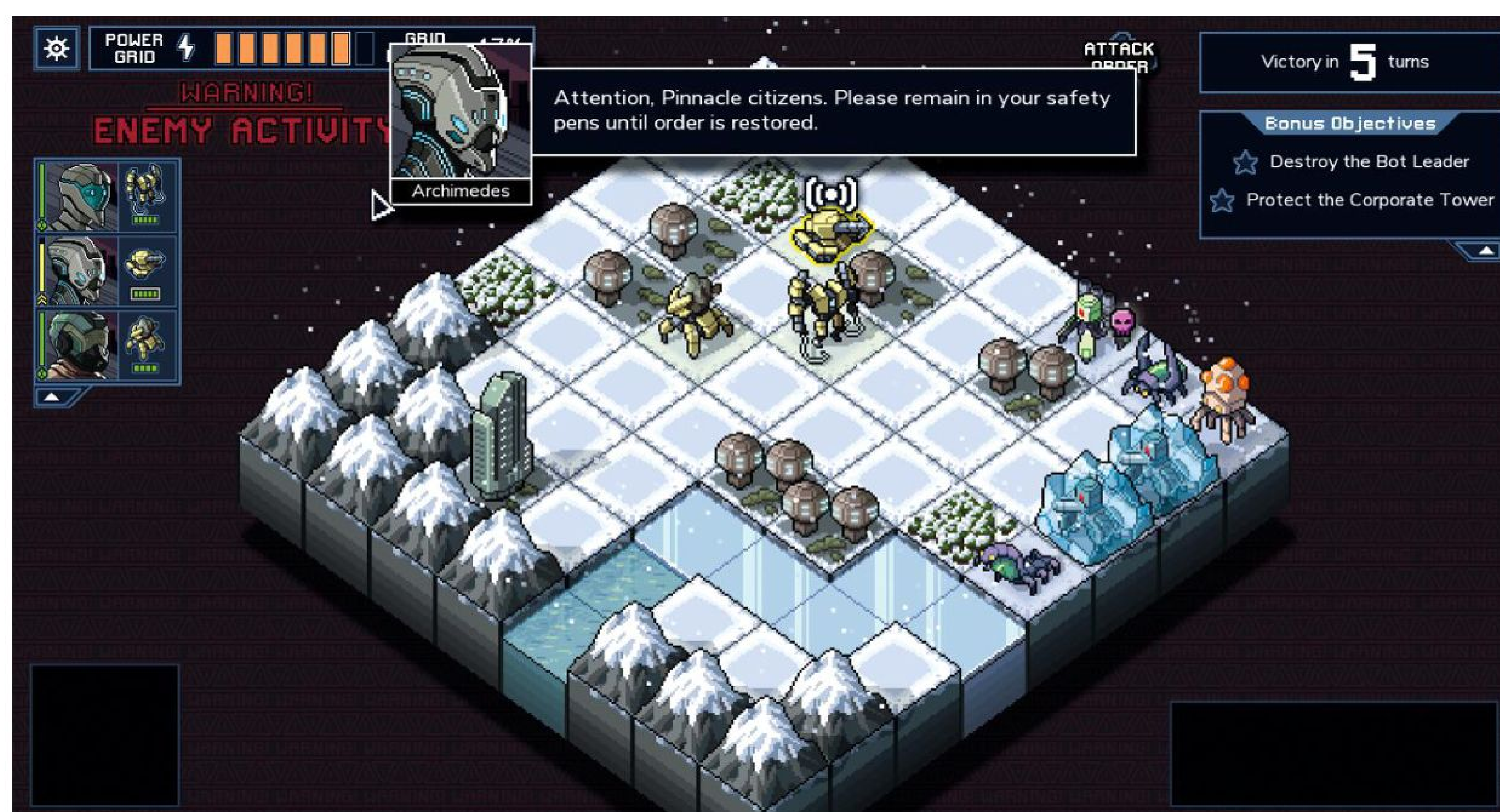
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ABOVE At the start of a campaign run you choose a star pilot and one of eight unlockable squads. The Rusting Hulks specialise in laying down electrified smoke which stops units from firing and does damage each turn







TOP In some levels you'll face airstrikes, which will hit different locations each turn. You can use these to your advantage by pushing the bugs into their path to have them instantly killed, but they can also destroy your mechs.
MAIN Each of the game's four islands has a different theme which is reflected in maps by their look and various common features. Factory Island's maps feature conveyor belts, which move units at the start of the Vek's turn.
LEFT As you play you'll unlock named pilots with special abilities, each given voice by Chris Avellone, writer of *Planescape: Torment*. Their characterisation, along with that of the CEO of each island, brings this little pixel tactics world to life



Into The Breach's interface is an object lesson in communicating cause and effect, and essential to planning your response

Post Script

The difference between tactics and puzzle games is certainty

This is a game that trades on perfect knowledge. In every turn you know what each bug is going to attack. You know how much damage they will deliver to their targets. You know they'll be set on fire. You know in what order they will carry out their actions. You know exactly where they will be pushed when you attack them with your Artillery Mech, and that one point of damage will be dealt to each when one of the bugs is pushed into your Combat Mech. Nothing is a mystery, everything is determined, and everything is revealed. Every turn of *Into The Breach*, then, is an intricate little mechanical puzzle about pushing and eliminating threats so that when it comes to the Vek's turn, they're rendered impotent.

Tactics games have always been built on the fundamentals of puzzle games. Puzzle mechanics were certainly part of *Advance Wars*, in which you'd work out how to use your army in the most efficient way possible, destroying the most enemy units while doing the least damage to yourself. Anti-air against helicopters; softening tanks with your artillery before finishing them with your mechs. But there was always uncertainty in *Advance Wars*, from its fog-of-war levels to waiting, heart-in-mouth, for the results of a 95% hit rating attack. Will the enemy infantry be destroyed or left with one health point, blocking your army's progress across the bridge for another agonising turn?

Pure puzzle games trade on certainty, not guesswork. In offering no room for chance, *Into The Breach* reinterprets the tactics genre with its puzzle roots at the fore, and in doing so can greatly expand the complexities of its rulesets. When a player isn't having to leave room in their head for planning for possibilities, they're instead free to play around with more varied weapons and abilities. Units can exhibit more differences, be more customised, and play more varied roles because you'll always know the exact results of their (sometimes weird) capabilities. That goes for the Vek, too, as well as all the environmental gimmicks levels can throw up, such as a map that steadily floods each turn, or tiles which fall away into a chasm.

The challenge for Subset Games was to deliver an extraordinary amount of contextual information to the player while keeping its interface readable. It succeeds. Trajectories for projectiles are coded by colour and by shape, so you know to tell an artillery shot from a cannon shot which can be intercepted. Health bars appear when you hover over a mech under threat, a flashing segment showing what will be lost if the attack goes ahead. Large yellow arrows appear when one of your actions will push; if it will cause a unit to collide with something you'll know what that means. And if you're still confused, you can click on a mech or an enemy to see a tooltip animation showing how its attacks work.

Most of this detail is shown when you mouseover or interact with the actors in the scene, but the red hatched lines that denote the tiles which will be hit in Vek attacks are always visible. This is the key information, the top line from which you'll start to delve into the details. Count the number of cites with red hatched lines on them and compare to the number of mechs you have left. Now you know how desperate things are and you can start to prioritise. Feeling a plan come together, tentatively at first, then bolstered by research and a little testing, is one of the greatest pleasures of puzzle games, and in *Into The Breach* you get to experience it effectively endlessly, its intricate mechanics tuned to serve up deeply involving puzzles over and over again. In that sense, you can look at the whole game as a procedural puzzle generator, but at the same time, each conundrum directly emerges from your earlier decisions. It's in the space between strict game rules and open player choice that *Into The Breach*'s tactical magic lies. ■

Kirby Star Allies

Switch may have had an outstanding first year, though on reflection, Nintendo might wonder if it went too big too soon. The best *Mario* game in a decade followed the best *Zelda* in even longer. With *Splatoon 2*, it refined and built upon its most exciting new property in years, just after launching its *other* most exciting new property in years, the wonderfully eccentric *Arms*. Yet having sustained a remarkable run, Switch is increasingly being propped up by indies and remakes. Labo may be just around the corner, but otherwise, until later this year at least, Nintendo is relying upon something of a second-string lineup.

Perhaps that's a little unfair on Kirby, who's been a safe pair of hands (and lungs) for some years now. Hal's mascot is a remarkably consistent performer – we'll ignore his most recent 3DS spin-off – but then reliability isn't the kind of thing to raise anyone's pulse. Still, *Triple Deluxe* and *Planet Robobot* were entertaining enough, and *Star Allies* maintains a similar standard. Which is to say it's quintessential Kirby: a platformer as well-made as it is easily conquered, ideally suited to younger players and parents looking for something undemanding to co-op with their kids for a few hours on a lazy Sunday.

Star Allies, in fact, shows Kirby embracing his status as a supporting act. His name may be on the box, but here he constantly shares centre stage. The traditional world-ending threat is not one he can prevent alone: instead he'll lob hearts to recruit those he normally calls his enemies. From gorillas to beetles, snowmen to sentient plugs, all can be won over by a simple show of affection, with bosses the only exception – and even a couple of those can be pressed into service once defeated. By default they're AI-controlled, though up to three other players can become them by squeezing both shoulder buttons on a spare controller.

Effectively, this means you can build a team with a wide array of powers to cover any given scenario, but the areas surrounding the gentle environmental puzzles always feature the enemies you'll need to solve them. Occasionally, you'll need two at once: a flaming sword is the only way to both cut and ignite the fuse of a bomb to ensure it explodes at the right time. Here, any character with a blade must raise it so a fire-breathing ally can set it ablaze. It's a pity the solutions are spelled out by nearby signs; happily, these so-called 'tips' can be turned off.

But the primary use of these combinations is to make even lighter work of threats. Often, it's a matter of combining elemental powers with traditional weapons to boost their attack – Blizzard Cutter, Sizzle Whip and Zap Sword are all self-explanatory – but there are some unusual ones besides. A friend with a brush can sweep Rock Kirby into a curling stone, sending him sliding downhill to knock rows of opponents off their feet. An artist can conjure a giant statue, splattered with paint. New combos are heralded by brief, celebratory cutaways: a cheerful reward for trying something different. Sometimes you'll find alternative solutions to similar problems, freezing a cascade to get past on one level, and using the delightfully-named Chumbrella to keep your friends dry as they pass beneath it on another.

A few combos seem mightily overpowered. Bomb-throwers may not be able to jump while they've got an explosive in their hand, but the Zap ability produces a column of electricity from each explosion, letting them hit airborne enemies without needing to take flight. Then again, Kirby has never prioritised challenge so much as efficient play, inviting you to defeat bosses without taking damage, or in the fastest possible time. This is emphasised in a terrific extra mode that benches its star entirely, so that his allies can essentially become the protagonist of their own game. Here, you race through remixed courses against the clock, obtaining pickups that increase your health, speed and attack, until you're demolishing bosses in a matter of seconds.

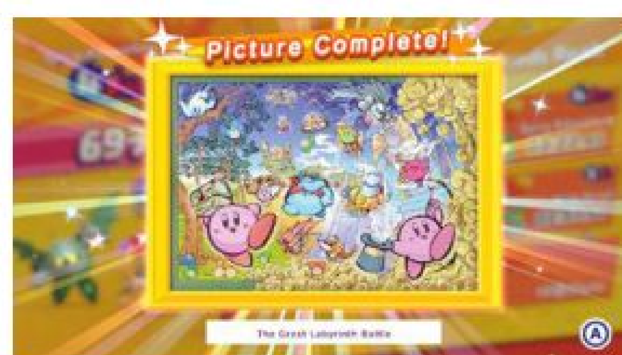
Even in the story mode, the only reminder that Kirby's supposed to be the star – outside the infrequent cutscenes, at least – comes when an ally strays to the edge of the screen and they're swiftly spirited back to his side. This can even be a boon: anticipating a fatal fall, the Kirby player can move to a position to stop it. Teammates may, indeed, find themselves having a little more fun. Kirby must still spit out air to descend after floating upwards, whereas other characters can simply stop tapping jump to drop. They don't need to get rid of their previous ability to gain a new one, either. And there's less pressure on them, too: if Kirby falls down a pit, then it's back to the last checkpoint for everyone. If others fall, they can simply inhabit one of the remaining allies – or, if all four slots are taken, wait for Kirby to befriend the next enemy he sees.

If that central idea sounds nauseatingly sappy, its cutesier moments are leavened with a streak of inventive weirdness and strong visual appeal: it may not have vast 3D worlds to contend with, but Hal has quietly produced one of the best-looking Switch games to date. That strangeness and beauty combines in a luminous and agreeably bonkers climax which nods to several past Kirby games, and even seems to riff on *The Wonderful 101*'s hyperactive finale. It's a fine sign-off from a game that seems as enthused about its old ideas as its new ones, that knows exactly what it is and needs to be. At a point in Switch's life where Nintendo is looking to keep players happy until the big guns are ready, Hal has followed its remit to the letter. Its hero might be forever wearing someone else's hat, but there's something to be said for a series that's this comfortable in its own skin.

7

Developer Hal Laboratory
Publisher Nintendo
Format Switch
Release Out now

Its cutesier moments are leavened with a streak of inventive weirdness and strong visual appeal



'SAW POINT
Well, *someone* at Hal misses 3DS's StreetPass feature. *Star Allies'* choice of pickup is jigsaw pieces, which are usually awarded by beating certain enemies or locating treasure chests. At the end of a stage, these are placed at random into puzzles that gradually reveal a selection of bonus art. The pink central spaces require you to obtain special pieces; there's one of these per level, usually secreted in a hidden room or somewhere off the critical path. You'll finish the game with the gallery a long way from being completed – though you can earn more pieces from the time attack mode as well as replaying courses. Beyond that, you'll find two asides that feel like reskinned *Mario Party* minigames, though they're entirely unremarkable, and hardly worthy of being considered separate modes.

RIGHT At intervals you'll find platforms that allow you to join together. You might form a train, say, or a rolling circle, prompting destructive auto-runner sections as you jump gaps and smash through enemies and obstacles. **BELOW** The trade-off for the improved lighting, detail and effects is a drop from Kirby's usual 60fps to 30, though it maintains that pretty consistently, even when four players are using different elemental abilities at once. **MAIN** Poor old Whispy Woods shows up once more for another shoeing, and he can be finished off in double-quick time. If all four players have flame powers, they can set him alight, leaving him not just teary-eyed but thoroughly charred. Disturbing stuff







ABOVE A palace on each of the four worlds lets you summon special characters. Stop a spinning reel and you'll obtain a partner – though you'll need to finish the next stage before it'll let you return to recruit another



Chuchel

Developer/publisher Amanita Design
Format Android, iOS, PC (tested)
Release Out now (PC), 2018 (Android, iOS)

When was the last time a videogame made you roar with laughter? It's probably been a while: comedy games are notoriously difficult to pull off. But Amanita Design has succeeded in style with *Chuchel*, a consistently hilarious point-and-click caper about an angry little ball of dust who'll do just about anything to rescue his beloved cherry. Simple, yet exquisitely crafted elements unite to form charming skits. You'll perform bathroom acrobatics to escape a set of chattering teeth, wake a subterranean neighbour with a game of Whac-A-Mole – and laugh yourself silly at a pink blancmange that takes wicked, mellifluous delight in teasing our furious hero.

It's this uncomplicated pudding scene that perhaps best demonstrates Amanita's confident mastery of the form. The maker of *Machinarium* and *Botanicula* has taken a different tack here: while an intricate art style and wistful tones defined its previous work, *Chuchel* is content to rely upon the strength of its core characters. Minimalist white backdrops ensure the spotlight is always on the eponymous star and his company. Chuchel himself is instantly charismatic, an unfortunate collection of lint in an orange hat whose grumbles, screams and missteps make every poke and click entertaining. Prodding the giant dessert to watch Chuchel struggle for his prize is funny in itself, the cherry dangled over his head by a bully giggling its own name in harmonious synths. But when you do start to feel sorry for the fuzzball, there's a puzzle to solve – the reward is, throughout Chuchel's adventure, a visual gag, and the brief possession of his cherry once more.

While point-and-click conundrums are the main thrust of the fruit-fuelled chase, even the simplest of scenes is an opportunity to play the fool. Indeed, there's a deceptive elegance to a well-crafted comedy title. Amanita has crafted a lavish animation for every innocent interaction – an optimistic attempt to win over an alien, an experimental lick of a mushroom. Yes, most of the things you'll have Chuchel attempt will end in failure, but every one is a riot, and all potential puzzle-solving options available to you are made clear in uncluttered presentation. As point-and-click games so often are, it's a process of trial and error; *Chuchel* makes it a joy, the majority of your actions unfolding into glorious fiasco.

> Chuchel makes trial-and-error a joy, the majority of your actions unfolding into glorious fiasco

In Amanita's hands, the slapstick action glides elegantly onwards. Useful UI touches mean *Chuchel*'s effervescent spirit plays out without frustration: an indicator shows when a short non-interactive cutscene is playing, so you can sit back and enjoy the spectacle, while clickable street signs drop into scenes to reveal puzzle hints if you've dawdled long enough to suggest you're stuck. When it works as intended, it's the sort of unobtrusive helping hand that can eliminate frustration and pull the focus back onto the funny stuff. But it's not always appreciated. Not every hint is optional: the instructive posters plastered on a wall in one section, for instance, give the game away too early. *Chuchel* is so adept at encouraging you to take your time that it's a shame it can't tell the difference between voluntary and involuntary pauses.

Still, it's a rare occurrence, and you're mostly left in peace to guide Chuchel and his hairy jellybean buddy Kekel through this strange world. Generally, the more abstract the situations, the greater the delight. Early on, an elephantine friend's cranium – which doubles as a jacuzzi, by the way – must be prised open for Chuchel to fish out the elusive cherry. Later, a chorus of ground-dwelling fish can be silenced via creative solutions involving shape-shifting fruit, helping Chuchel sneak past an alert yeti towards his delicious goal. When the more explicitly videogamey parts turn up (there are homages to *Flappy Bird*, *Space Invaders*, *Angry Birds* and *Pac-Man*, among others), it's almost a disappointment. Happily, *Chuchel* wastes no time in turning many on their heads – *Tetris*, for instance, becomes more about avoiding death than setting up that perfect line clear.

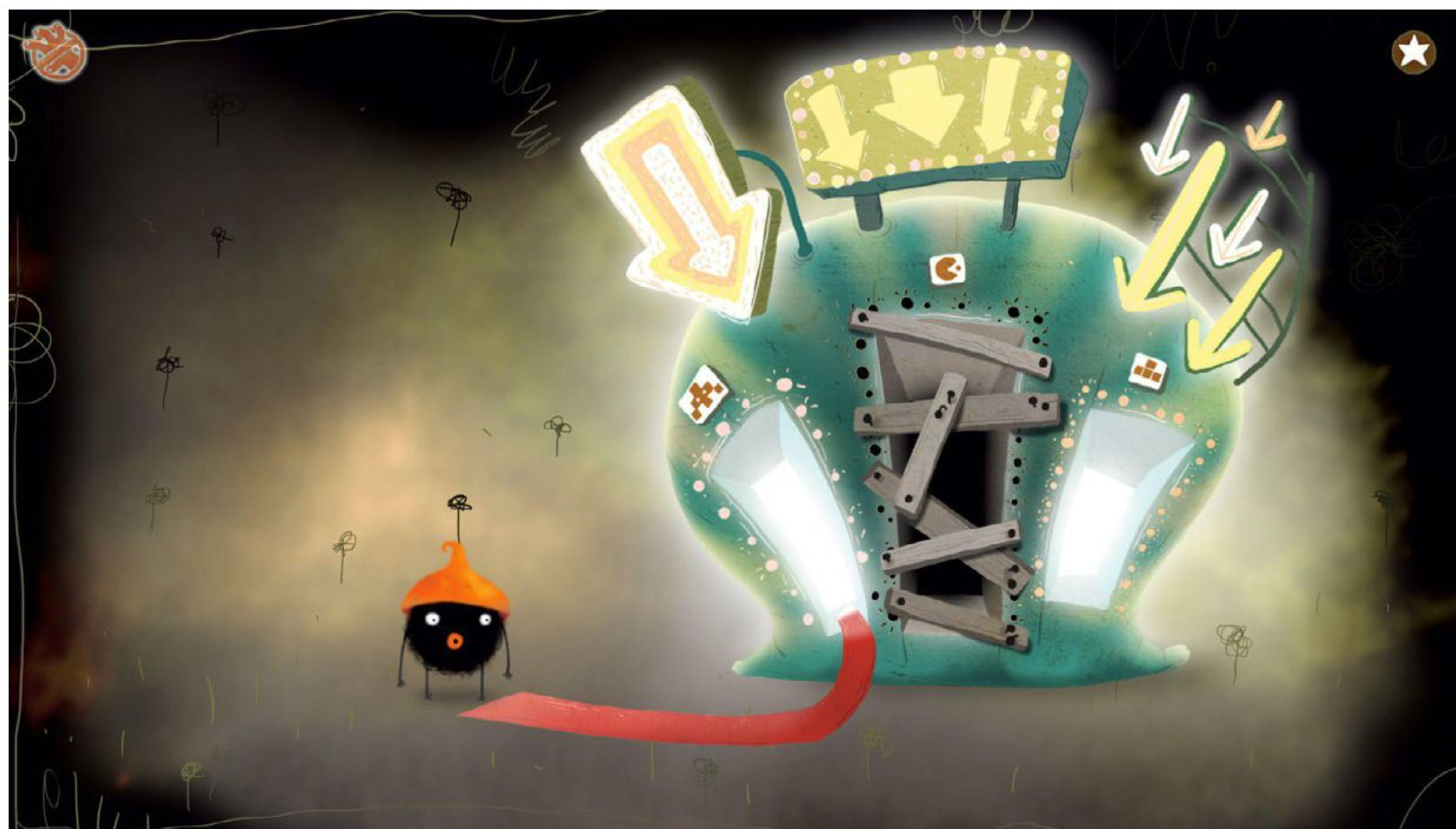
Some of these scenes, however, do outstay their welcome by quite a bit. Three *Pac-Man* mazes in a row is at least one too many: the last is an enormous, needlessly finicky section that takes an age to complete despite plentiful, endlessly regenerating powerups. Meanwhile, trying to manoeuvre a spring-shoed Chuchel left and right in an overlong *Space Invaders* tribute, catching tiny drops of paint, is a tedious task. The saving grace is that death is not unduly punished with a repeat performance of previous waves. This misguided reliance on more traditional minigames is disheartening: *Chuchel*'s real strengths lie in its masterful comic timing and childlike sense of wonder. And make no mistake, if you've got a small, hyperactive dirt-magnet of your own at home, *Chuchel* is essential. With 30 individually replayable chapters, each an entertaining skit in its own right, it's about as close to a playable collection of bedtime stories as you could get. (Amanita has prepared for younger adventurers: a moment in which a cat seems destined to meet a grisly fate is deftly sidestepped.) Well, if you don't mind your kid having bonkers dreams, that is.

Then again, why would you? *Chuchel* is a deliriously funny celebration of surreal creativity and imagination from silly start to ludicrous finish. It proves that games can still have a sense of humour, as well as broad appeal without imposing compromise. Despite the occasional stumble, *Chuchel*'s all-consuming quest for the cherry encourages fun, creative thinking and rewards it at every turn with a new and unexpected punchline. We'll never look at pudding with a straight face ever again.

8



WILD THING
Chuchel's antics are amplified by excellent sound design: every interaction prompts odd noises, whether it's the twang of a cherry being plucked from a tree, the strange croon of a snoring robin, or the crash of cymbals upon a particularly significant collision of Chuchel and obstacle. Chuchel's own nonsensical jabberings are so expressive that he might as well be speaking Queen's English, as he coos lovingly at a giant cherry, pleads with malicious, lightswitch-happy spirits or utterly flips his little orange lid and screams as his cherry is pilfered for the umpteenth time. Alternative rock band DVA (who also composed *Botanicula*'s soundtrack) scored *Chuchel*, its blend of acoustic electro and freakfolk a fine fit for Amanita's unpredictable gag reel.



ABOVE Multiscreen puzzles play host to some serious head-scratchers. You'll try multiple approaches before finding a successful one: thank goodness, because fail states such as this one are not to be missed.
LEFT While *Chuchel*'s remixes of traditional games are weaker than its bizarre situational challenges, their presentation can't be faulted, as you win medals to give to a chandelier-guarding snail in exchange for useful treats

BELOW There's always a sound thread of logic to puzzles. When this cheeky blancmange swallows Chuchel's cherry, you'll soon guess how the fuzzball might retrieve it



ABOVE In the same vein as Pixar movies, there's something for everyone. Some of the jokes in *Chuchel* will sail over kids' heads, including twists on scenes from The Matrix and the opening to Raiders Of The Lost Ark



Metal Gear Survive

First, you are afraid. You are, indeed, petrified. Thrust into a barren alternate dimension where the crystal-headed undead lurk beyond a wall of dust, and with only a surly grunt for company, your introduction to Konami's *Metal Gear*-themed survival sim is a grim and uncompromising one. You're starving and thirsty from the very second the reins are handed over to you, several orange HUD indicators flashing in panic. You're unarmed, under-equipped, and slowly but surely dying with every passing second. From there, it only gets harder. This is a journey into quite how punishing a game can be while still offering you an incentive to prevail. It's less a matter of whether you *will* survive, and more whether you can be bothered to try.

As the first *Metal Gear* game to emerge since Hideo Kojima's acrimonious departure from Konami, *Survive* at least deserves credit for doing something that extends well beyond the creative blueprint left by 2015's *The Phantom Pain*. Much narrower in scope and mechanics than its predecessor, *Survive* has its own ambitions, and its own particular (iron-clad) demands of the player. Here and there, the odd passing strand of *The Phantom Pain*'s DNA can be seen floating by, in the form of repurposed Fulton balloons, familiar desert landscapes, and a radial indicator around the player showing how much attention the local AI is paying to them. That's Konami's prerogative: it's a *Metal Gear* game, after all. But it's certainly not trying to ape the series' former glories – even, it appears, on a technical level. Framerates on the base-model PS4 are consistently disappointing, while movement animations and contextual actions such as vaulting over obstacles are unrecognisably clumsy next to Kojima's *Metal Gear* swansong. Even the pause menu has its problems. So no, there'll be no mistaking this for a new Kojima game.

Instead, *Metal Gear Survive* delivers the kind of brutal survival experience for which there seemed to be a nigh-limitless appetite half a decade ago. And it does so with a kind of vigour that feels bewilderingly punitive, eagerly wiping away progress every time you over-stretch yourself by straying too far beyond the dust wall and, say, running out of oxygen, or food, or losing your bearings in the fog and getting ganked by Wanderers. It's a game of perpetual hunger and thirst management, the looming risk of contracting a disease after drinking dirty water, and gathering vast quantities of materials such as clay and burlap for reasons that you'll hope will later become apparent. Of spending the opening six hours with only a long-ish pole for a weapon, and of scavenging for hours in order to build a few fences round your base. And, of course – *of course* – zombies.

Death and its varying degrees are something of a theme here. During the Mother Base attack in which Big Boss and Miller are evacuated, you yourself died in the line of duty. While fellow fallen comrades are lain in coffins and dispatched ceremonially into the sea, your cadaver's set aside. Men with clandestine agendas exchange conspiratorial chatter above your lifeless lump until – well, until you find yourself awake and apparently alive, spat out from a wormhole into an uninviting realm known as Dite. It'd be especially uncharitable, though not wholly inaccurate, to say it's an analog of *Doom*'s setup, only told via 35 minutes of cutscenes rather than elegant, self-evident environmental storytelling. Still, the mystery of your circumstances does hold allure.

Developer/publisher Konami
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

It feels as though Konami channelled Franz Kafka to produce a retelling of the myth of Sisyphus

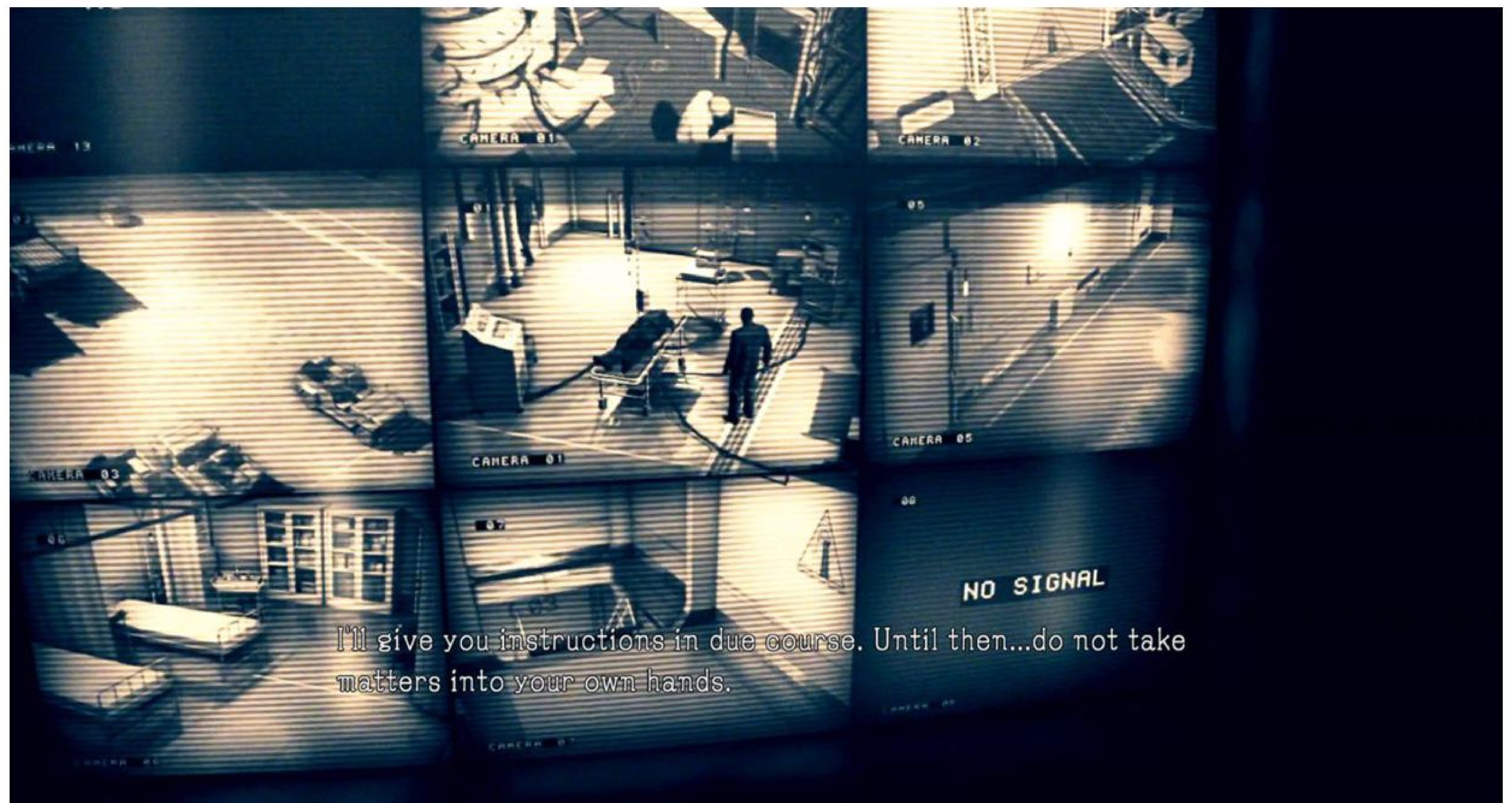


FAILURE TO LAUNCH
Metal Gear Survive's spirit of Kafkaesque struggle extended even as far as its release. Some launch-day users were met with a message informing them that an update was required to start the game, but also found that no updates were available to download in order to resolve the issue. Following that, there have been numerous connection issues, scheduled server-maintenance periods, balance adjustments and bug fixes. During our review, we are kicked out of solo games several times by dropped server connections, although co-op play functions as intended without any server dropouts. By way of apology for its teething problems, Konami issued players who'd created an avatar within one week of launch with 100 SV coins and Premium Boost.

About ten hours in, an AI friend named Virgil AT-9 who's been guiding you through the mission back at base requests that you power up a wormhole digger. Doing so triggers a wave-based survival sequence at your base, and the first time you try it you're swamped by Wanderers and the digger is destroyed. So next you head out to an area on the map where there's an unusually high concentration of Kuban energy, the currency used for character levelling and crafting. Arriving at a crystal field beyond the dust, you dispatch several Wanderers and smash the formations, gathering that sweet Kuban. Only now you're dangerously hungry. Out in the dust there are no food sources, and the map's offline. Wandering blindly, you try to get your bearings and make it back to safety, oxygen levels now a factor, but you're lost. And you die. What began as a wave survival mission is now a salvage mission to gather the belongings you dropped upon dying. So that you can level up. So that you can finish the wormhole-digger mission.

Co-op might have offered some levity, and the chance to halve a shared problem. But here again, in its unwavering pursuit of that brutal vision of survival gaming, teaming up only seems to encourage Konami to stack the odds further against you. Most activities carry a level 25 entry requirement, and those that don't are generally extremely difficult until you reach a similar level anyway. Alone or together, it feels as though Konami channelled Franz Kafka to produce a retelling of the myth of Sisyphus. Too often, it all tips over into abject frustration because there's simply too little on the horizon to propel you forwards – only the chance to scrabble around in the lower thirds of your various ever-depleting bars once again, maybe for a bit longer this time. Generally there's a point in survival games when staying alive becomes fairly comfortable, and more ambitious ventures replace the desperate toil for supplies. If that moment ever arrives in *Metal Gear Survive*, it's paced farcically slowly. It's entire days of play before you even get a gun. Maybe it's a kind of gaming Stockholm Syndrome, but being punished so relentlessly does instil a sense of respect for *Metal Gear Survive*. It has a vision, and it's sticking to it however much you cry in protest. Respect and enjoyment, however, don't necessarily go hand in hand.

5



RIGHT The opening hour of throaty cutscenes is a red herring – it's primarily codec chatter thereafter. Capably written chatter, sure, but hardly a point of emphasis. **MAIN** Spotting a sheep for the first time might prompt a search for edible berries instead to spare its life. By the second time, it's a zero-sum game: either it dies, or you do. **BOTTOM** Squint and this could be PS2-era *Metal Gear*. In gameplay terms it bears only a passing resemblance to Kojima's work







ABOVE Among its cast of painfully earnest survivors, acerbic AI ally Virgil AT-9 provides some precious moments of levity. "I dare say," it intones with a good amount of am-dram relish, "our mission has failed"

Where The Water Tastes Like Wine

Dim Bulb Games' rambling anthology has a Sting in the tale, but for once we're not talking about an eleventh-hour revelation. Yes, that really is the former Police frontman as a card-playing wolf, who, after cheating you out of a winning hand, demands you collect stories scattered across America's vast sprawl to repay your debt. It's stunt casting, sure, but it works: Sting gives the wolf an aura of charismatic menace that perfectly fits a game about fables and folktales, myths and ghost stories.

In truth, they're rarely much more than sketches, though the idea is that these narrative seeds need time to take root and grow. You collect them as a skeletal hiker, trudging across a sparse, low-poly map and visiting states, towns and cities to witness or participate in short vignettes. You'll watch a wildcat chase a jackrabbit, share a coffee with a cowboy, play dead to escape a wild bear, and take part in a haunting morality play: all of these are told in text form, and illustrated by static but vivid hand-drawn art. Your choices can reshape them: confronted by an awful sight, you can bravely investigate for a horror-tinged tale, or turn tail and leave it as an enigma. Elsewhere, a naive decision on your part can turn a potential drama into a comedic episode. Later in your journey, you'll encounter these same stories again, as others relay them back to you, often with embellishments or odd new wrinkles. Sometimes you're given the opportunity to correct the lie, but often you'll find these strangers prefer their version, even if it's no longer truthful.

You'll understand why, since this is a game about people with hardscrabble lives. Those you encounter on your journey find comfort, intrigue or simple escapism from these stories; some are clinging desperately to the nebulous idea of the American Dream, while for others it's long since become a nightmare. There's something moving about seeing a young single mother's eyes light up at a fanciful tale, a dose of romance or whimsy briefly bringing excitement to her miserable existence.

Unfortunately, you'll understand all too clearly how these folks feel. It may well be intentional, but *Where The Water Tastes Like Wine* does rather too good a job of making the burden on your shoulders weigh heavy. The map is ugly in places, and downright drab in others. Beneath a sky daubed in rough brush strokes is a strangely flat and bland representation of a country that should surely be more visually diverse than this. You walk across it at a maddeningly slow pace, a weary trudge that can only be sped up by whistling: this prompts a rudimentary rhythm-action minigame that quickly becomes an irritating distraction.

It also clashes with an eclectic score that does a far better job of evoking a sense of place, shifting from blues to jazz to folk and back again as you cross into new states. One recurring theme is strongly reminiscent of Townes Van Zandt's Waitin' Around To Die, which seems apropos given the focus on strugglers and stragglers. But while it makes exploration more tolerable, the music frequently jars with the tone of the stories being told. We'd surely have been more horrified by an encounter with a bloodied, shaggy-haired stranger had it not been soundtracked by the drum fills and trilling piano of an uptempo swing number.

Its problems come to a head during the campfire conversations that are supposed to be the game's highlights. You'll be inexorably drawn to these lights in the distance, as a moth to a flame, since it's here you'll meet the game's most fascinating and well-drawn characters. Their stories have been crafted by an array of writing talent and though several tales are familiar – a blues guitarist who foolishly made a deal with the devil, for example – that's rather the point. This is, after all, an anthology that celebrates the way existing stories can gain new resonance in the retelling.

It's more of a trade than a conversation, in practice: you tell them stories, and gradually they'll reveal more of themselves to you. Spin the right kind of yarn, and an eye at the top of the screen will steadily open, which makes perfect sense: you imagine them sizing you up with a suspicious squint, before letting their guard down, their eyes suddenly wide and trusting. When it's fully open, the next chapter of their story will unlock; they'll let you know where they're headed next, and you can take a detour if you want to hear more about them.

Yet after the first encounter, this process begins to feel depressingly mechanical. "You're a great storyteller," they'll purr. No. We're great story *selectors*, because we know which ones nesting within this clumsy radial menu have happy endings, which ones are funny, and which are scary. The bleak tone of many of these episodes means it can be a challenge to pick three hopeful tales in a row, but you can cheese it by leaning on the stories from the other travellers you meet on the road, which automatically focus on the dramatic, sad or thrilling parts depending on what your audience is after.

As your fellow itinerants require more stories they haven't heard to conclude their life stories, you'll begin to see the anecdotes you're picking up as nothing more than collectibles. Like so many open-world games, you find yourself wandering a map, looking to the nearest cluster of icons – the gaps between them growing ever wider as you plod onward. Most damningly of all, it turns the art of storytelling into a series of rudimentary exchanges, as you essentially trade one set of words for another, their value depleting over time as you accumulate more and more and only a small handful remain lodged in your memory. It's a game whose very structure serves to undermine its often excellent writing; that, in the end, is what really stings.

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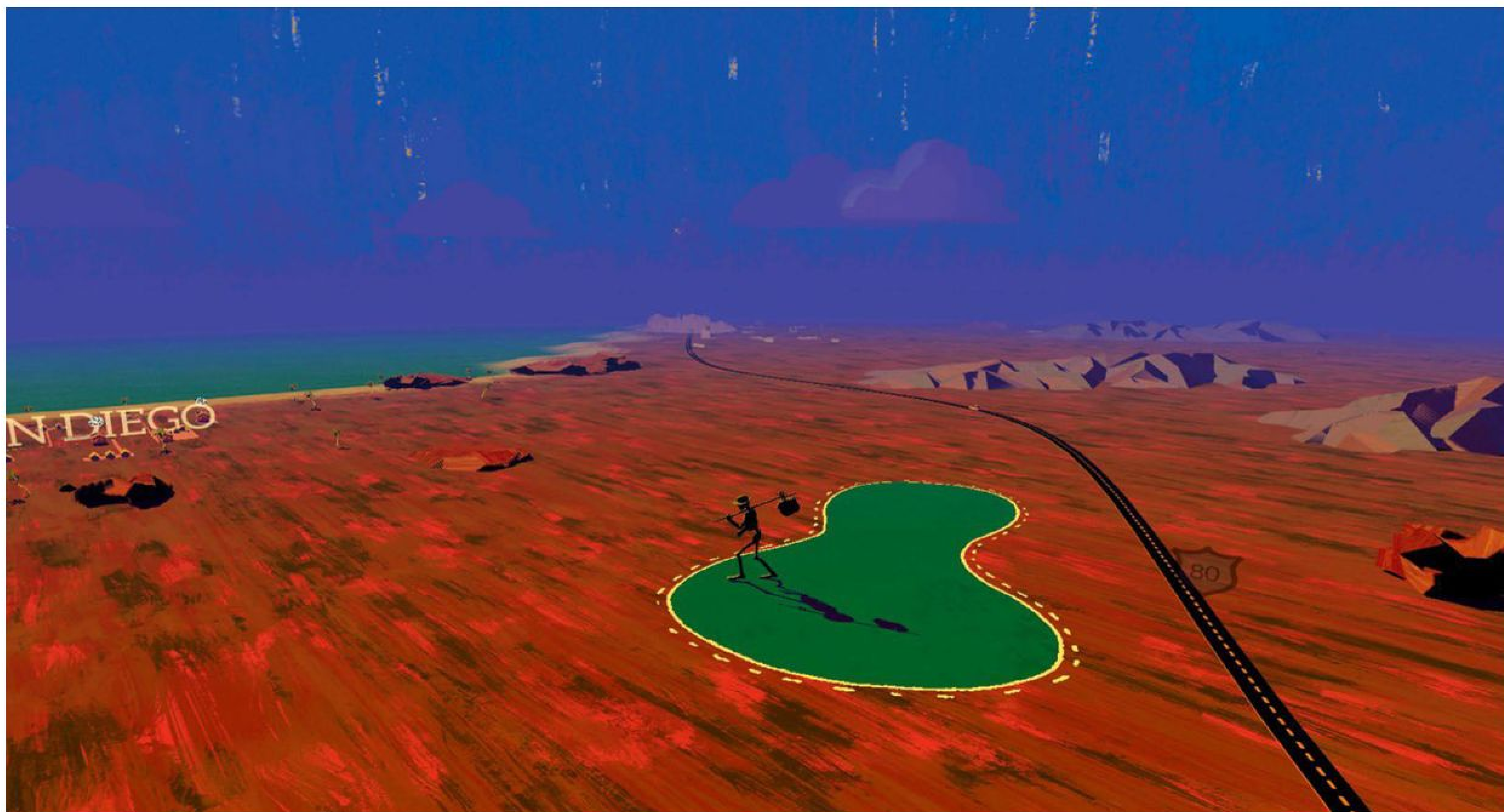
Developer/publisher Dim Bulb Games
Format PC
Release Out now

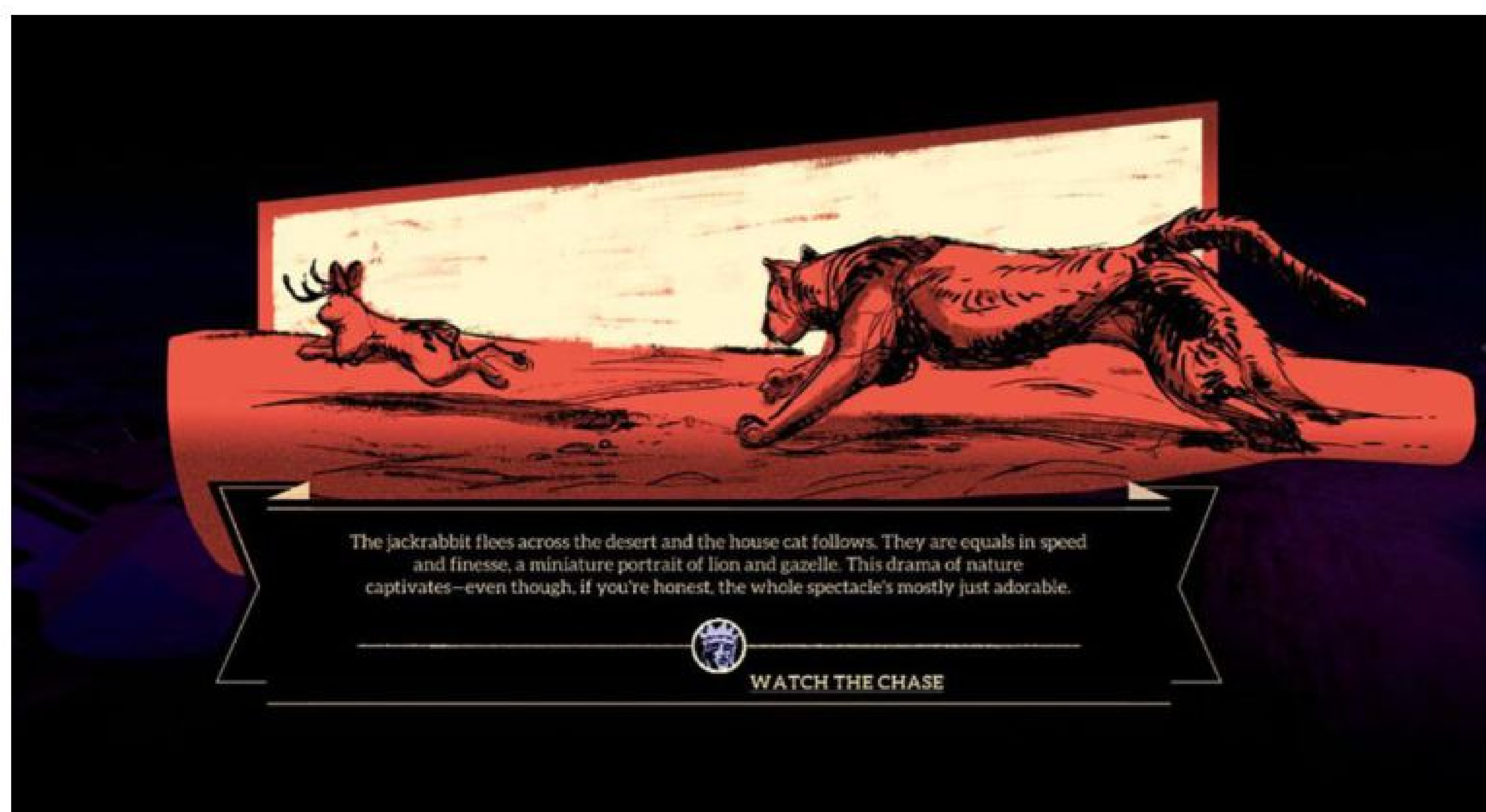
An anthology that celebrates the way existing stories can gain new resonance in the retelling



SURVIVAL HORROR
At each city, you can panhandle or find a job to earn money. Cash can be spent on food to stave off hunger – because a skeleton's still got to eat – or to travel by rail to a handful of nearby locations. You can hop a train elsewhere, too, though at considerable risk: if you're caught, you'll be beaten to death, which sends you back to your last stop via another chat with Sting's vulpine antagonist. Tiredness is a factor, too: fail to find a rest stop during a long trek, and you'll pass out from exhaustion. These survival elements feel like another pointless distraction, adding nothing but extra busywork. Dim Bulb could simply have had the wolf show up periodically, and none of this would have been missed in the slightest.

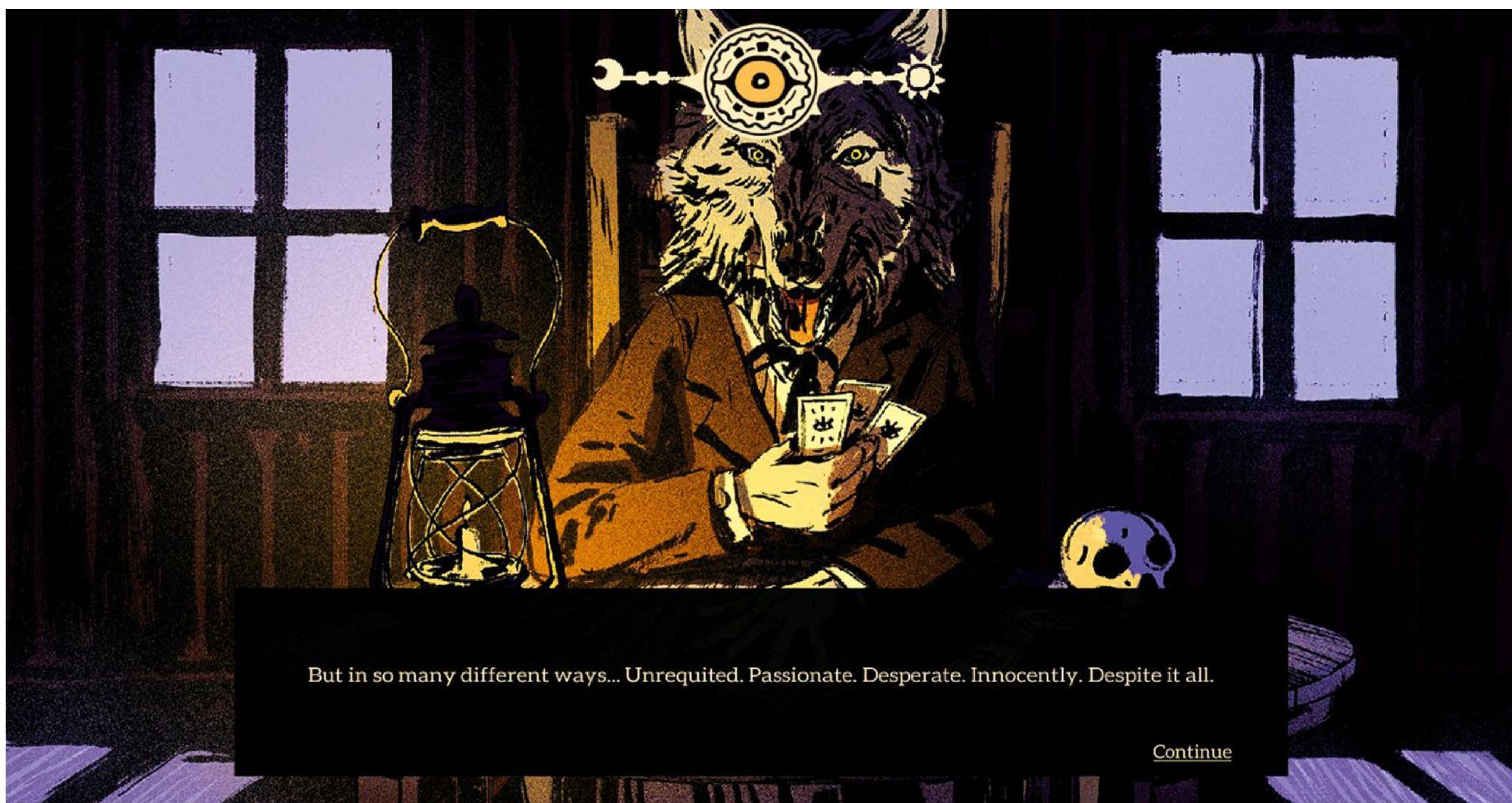
RIGHT Stand near a road and you can attempt to thumb a ride to hurry things along, though this doesn't always seem to work. Oddly, you'll only find cars travelling in one direction, and you'll often be dropped off well before you've reached any major cities.
BELOW The stories are categorised under 16 tarot cards; three tales for each card are considered 'active' at any time. Once you've accumulated enough, you can swap old ones out: useful when you've run out of sad tales to tell to a melancholic campfire companion.
MAIN The Dire Wolf only offers cryptic hints to the stories he wants to hear, but eventually you'll catch on and his own story will unfurl. Despite Sting's best efforts, we're not convinced it's worth the wait







ABOVE It's a little disappointing to encounter the same people on multiple occasions. It's not even as if the faces are familiar but the names are changed: these folks are evidently more well-travelled than we are



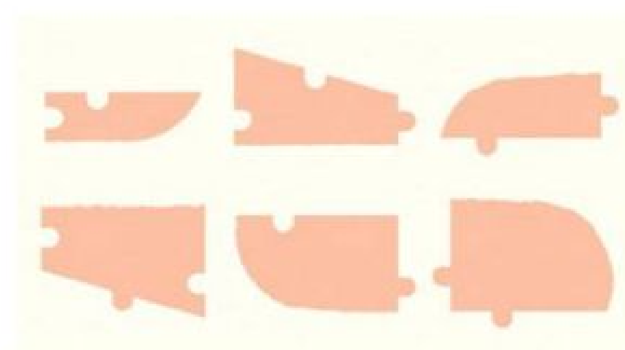
Florence

The extraordinary thing about *Florence* is just how ordinary it feels. Every beat of it is instantly recognisable: there are ups, there are downs, and all the while you're tap, tap, tapping along in time. Developer Mountains has captured the magical, the miserable and the mundane of young love in an hour-long interactive graphic novel, and the intimate space of a phone screen makes for the perfect setting.

Expressive, animated line-art wordlessly guides fingers and thumbs through scenes and frames. The odd visual hint is irksome – there's an ease to navigating *Florence* in which Mountains should be more confident, partially inherited through our experiences with comic books and partially through modern technology. Our heroine's actions feel familiar. Every one commands your touch: impatient stabs at a snooze button, apathetic swipes through social media feeds, poking at bites of a TV dinner. You're made to feel as though you're going through the motions. Then, suddenly, things change. In one soaring scene that demands you flip your phone horizontally to take it all in properly, Florence follows the shining sound of a nearby cello and encounters Krish in an audiovisual crescendo that makes the notion of 'falling' in love seem positively ridiculous.

Inventive interactions lend a personal touch. In one scene, you develop Polaroids by shaking each picture; in another heartbreaking tableau, torn pieces of a scene gently drift apart as you try in vain to reunite them

Developer Mountains
Publisher Annapurna Interactive
Format Android, iOS (tested)
Release Out now



BUBBLE SQUABBLE
Although Florence and Krish's conversations are wordless, the mechanics portraying them are some of the most eloquent in the game. Speech bubbles must be formed by clicking together individual puzzle pieces. At the beginning of the relationship, the puzzles take longer to arrange correctly – but as the pair become more comfortable, the pieces get easier to assemble. Arguments are the inevitable twist: the angrier Florence is, the easier the thoughts are to snap together, and you find yourself strangely determined to weight the quarrel in your favour with speedy replies.

As the romance unfolds, the methodical minigames are either reframed or replaced in favour of more emotionally complicated puzzles. Playing knick-knack *Tetris* with both sets of possessions on moving-in day is particularly tough, as you shuffle around the pieces and weigh the options: her family photo, or his cherished record player? It's music, after all, that defines the two. In lieu of words, Mountains represents Florence's emotional state in lilting piano, Krish's via his cello. It's another delicate touch. The notes are staccato and unsure on a first date, while the honeymoon periods are rich with harmonies.

What goes up must come down, of course. A golden ambition in one chapter is later rubbed to reveal a sober reality. Old routines resurface anew. Physically pushing Krish towards his dream is an important precursor to having Florence practise the same tough love on herself later on. And knick-knack *Tetris* returns, its context now altogether different. The story is by no means free of cliché: winding clocks to fast-forward time feels overdone, the extended metaphor of the couple as puzzle pieces a little trite, and lonely hearts gazing out of windows or crying in the shower borderline parodic. But perhaps the beats of love are more clichéd than any of us might comfortably admit. In stringing them together so uniquely, *Florence* strikes a chord that resonates long after the cello fades.

8







Moss

Given that virtual reality brings the player closer than ever to the fourth wall – if it's a window on another world, we now have our noses pressed against the glass – it's only natural that games should seek to break it. *Moss*, however, goes further by embracing it, making it an essential part of the game, its world and its story. This charming storybook adventure does not have a player; it has The Player.

Yes, you'll control Quill, the strong-willed, agile field mouse, using an analogue stick, something the fairytale narration chooses to gloss over. But as The Player, you'll have plenty else to do besides guiding our heroine through this taut four-hour adventure. A shimmering blue orb denotes your presence in the world, and using DualShock motion controls you'll line it up with your target, before squeezing a trigger to grab hold. You'll raise and lower platforms, rotate scenery, grab and reposition enemies and, when Quill takes damage in combat, nurse her back to health.

It's simple enough, but the fact that you essentially control two characters, each with very different sets of abilities, gives developer Polyarc plenty to play with. And it certainly does; the game is broken up into single-screen 3D puzzle chambers that, while never particularly difficult, are taxing in the way they force you to think about two different things at once, like trying to rub your stomach while patting your head.

Yet while there may be two characters, Quill is the undisputed star. If we see a better mantling animation in 2018, we'll be surprised, and her little shrugs and waves to The Player are frequently well-timed, as she seems to mirror your thoughts at just the right moment.

If she shares our frustrations with Polyarc's work, however, she's not telling. In the back half of the game the developer suddenly starts asking for a degree of timing and precision that exposes the frailty of the controls; the little shift in Quill's direction on the approach to a crucial jump, the perfectly fine-looking leap that somehow sends you tumbling, or the death by fireball caused by you not agreeing with the game's definition of 'forwards' during a mantle.

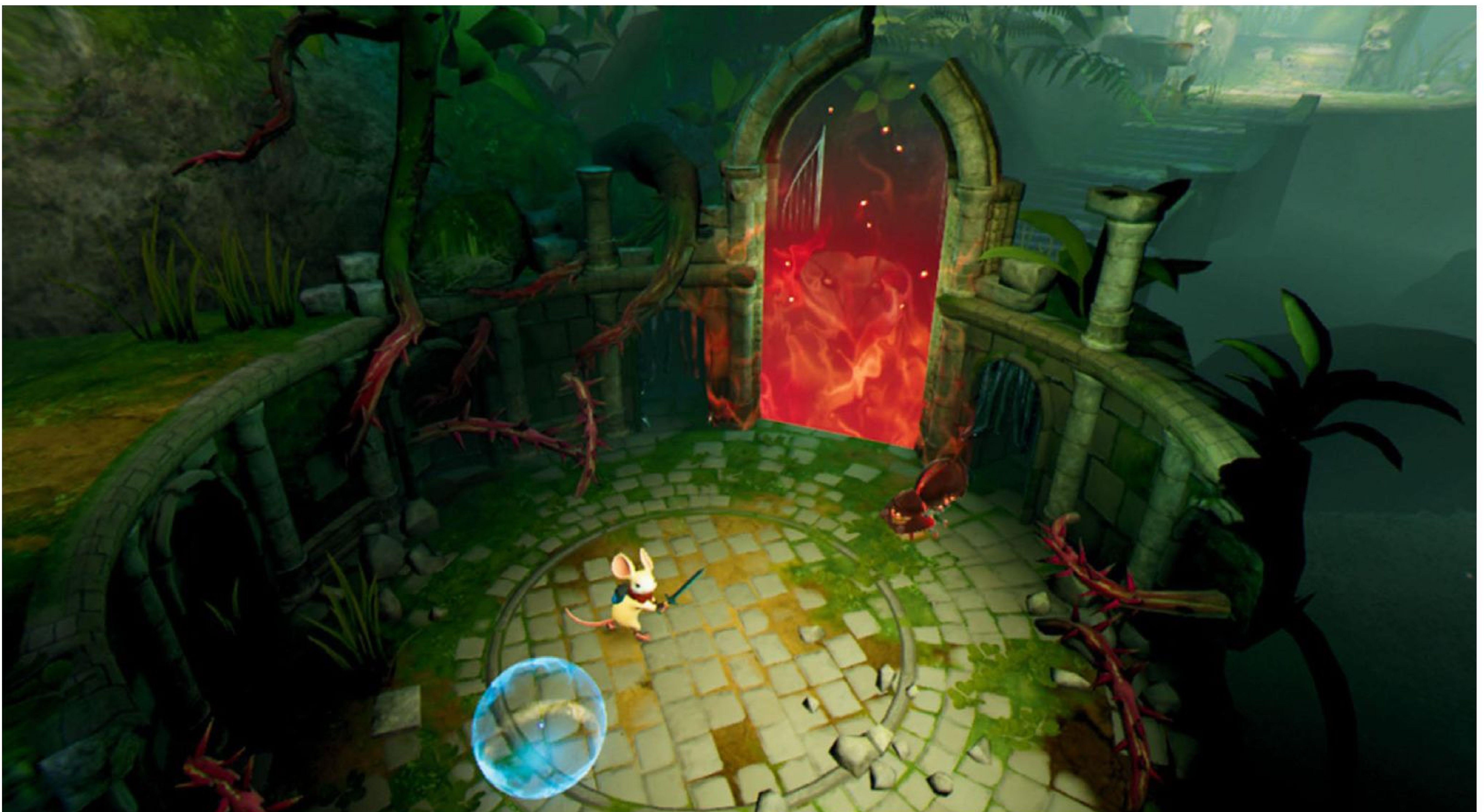
It's shockingly overwritten in places, too: the fairytale styling affords a certain floridity, yes, but we surely shouldn't be wincing our way through our bedtime story. Yet the biggest narrative crime comes right at the close, where what feels like the approach to the conclusion turns out to be, in fact, the end – a sour taste that's hardly helped by the naked sequel set-up that follows. We suppose we'll have to come back for more; we like Quill a lot, and she'll be absolutely stuck without us.

7

Developer/publisher Polyarc
Format PSVR
Release Out now

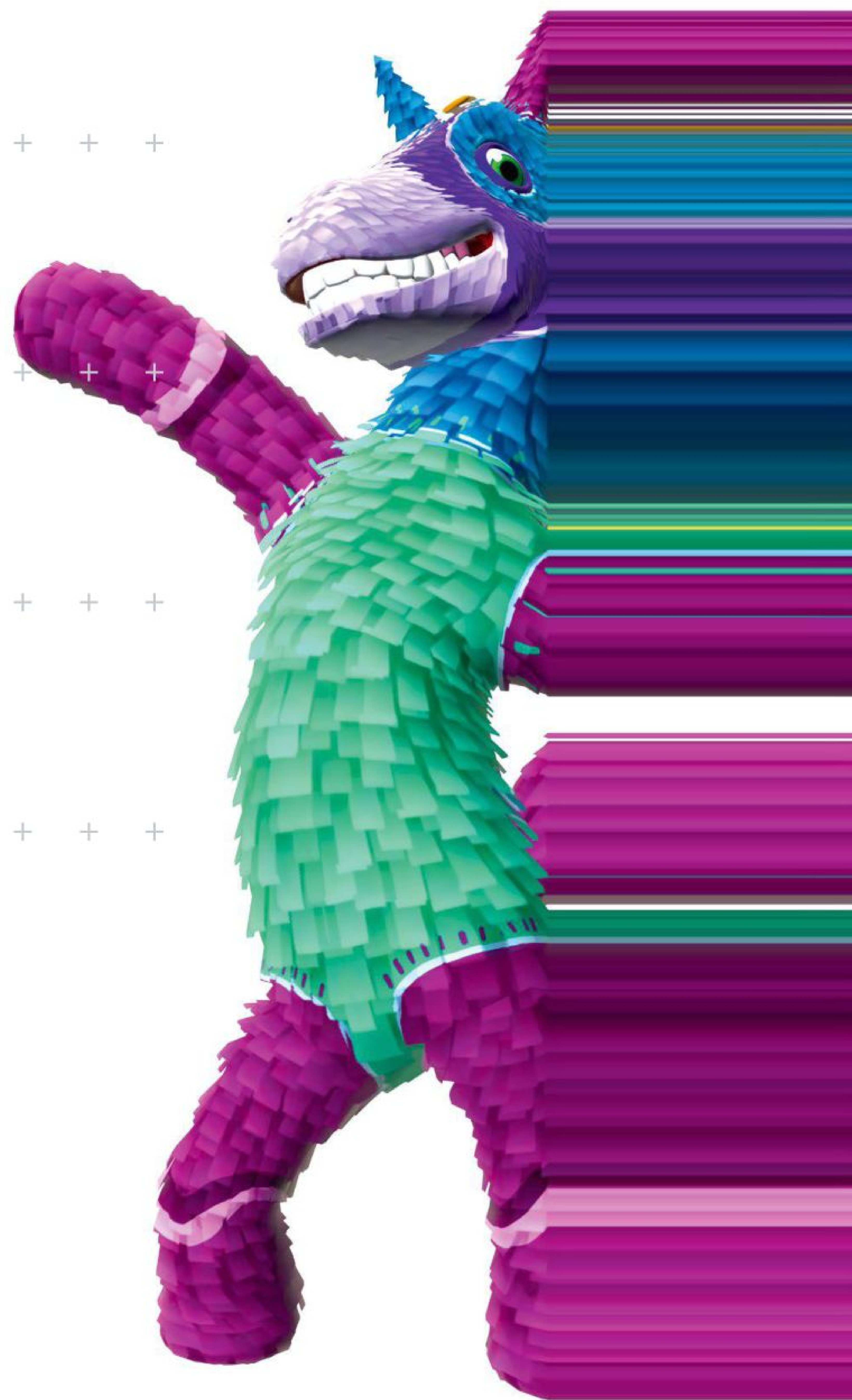


SCROLLING PLATFORMER
There are two types of collectibles strewn about the place. Relic Dust is everywhere, found in breakable objects, but Fragment Scrolls are the real draw. Sometimes, they'll be in plain sight, either down an obvious, but tricky path, or as the solution to a secondary puzzle. Yet they'll frequently be hidden from view, requiring that both you and Quill explore every nook and cranny. It's satisfying stuff, but don't expect much in terms of reward – all that's on offer for finding them all is a couple of Trophies.



The wall of fire tells you it's time for combat. Enemies pose little threat, which is just as well – Quill only has a basic sword slash, and dies in two hits. You can always grab an enemy and let Quill whale away unassailed





Viva Piñata

How Rare got its groove back by balancing the two sides of its history

By Alex Spencer

Developer Rare **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios **Format** 360, PC **Release** 2006

Back in 2006, Rare found itself at a crossroads. The developer had spent the 1990s working with Nintendo, creating some of the SNES, Game Boy and N64's most beloved titles. In 2002, though, it was acquired by Microsoft, becoming a firstparty developer for its new game console. In the transition, some of Rare's magic seemed to have been lost. None of the four games it developed in the intervening years were hits, critically or commercially, on anything like the scale of its Nintendo golden years.

As such, 2006's *Viva Piñata* was positioned as a comeback for the studio. The game was aimed at a younger audience and was intended to be the beginning of a fully fledged franchise, complete with its own animated TV show. On these terms, the game was not the success it deserved to be – but it proved that the embers of that old Rare magic still burned bright.

In *Viva Piñata*, the player is handed the deeds to a rough patch of land and tasked with turning it into a bustling garden by filling it with plants, decorations and – the game's undisputed stars – animals. Piñatas, to be precise, of which there are 60 varieties, from Arocknid to Zumbug, to attract into your garden with the hope that they'll make it their home.

This is achieved by meeting a tick list of needs for each species: the right kind of tree for them to nest in, enough water for aquatic creatures to splash around in, and the component parts of their diet. It's a gentle start to the game, but the process of winning over a piñata is truly satisfying. Spotting a new species for the first time is a treat. All 60 are charmingly designed, with names that pun on a type of sweet, like Profitamole or Buzzlegum. Visiting piñatas start out monochrome, but convince them to become residents and they'll bloom into full colour, revealing their vibrant blues, yellows and purples – the perfect visual reward for your efforts.

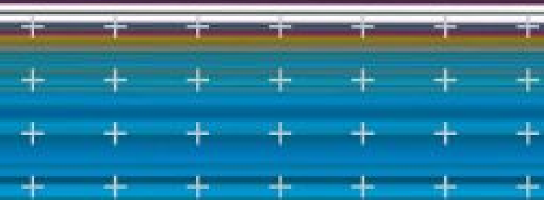
It's not hard to see why Microsoft saw the opportunity for a kid's TV series in *Viva Piñata*. Cuteness can be an easy thing to dismiss, but Rare pulls it off here with the kind of deft hand usually reserved for Disney cartoons and litters of puppies. Every bit of incidental animation is charming, bringing the piñatas and their world to adorable life.

Back in the Nintendo days, Rare had created *Banjo-Kazooie*, a series of kid-friendly games which were among the biggest sellers on the N64. In the *Donkey Kong Country* games, it filled out DK's supporting cast with the likes of Diddy and Cranky Kong. After the failure of *Kameo: Elements of Power*, an Xbox 360 launch title with a similar Saturday-morning cartoon aesthetic and a Pokémon-like cast of creatures, *Viva Piñata* provided much-needed proof that the design talent behind those older games was still alive and well.

Viva Piñata is more than just a pretty face, though. As the game progresses, it drip feeds the player a steady stream of new challenges. First, the introduction of 'piñatavores', which won't settle in your garden until they've eaten one of its existing residents. There's a certain old-lady-who-swallowed-a-fly logic to attracting some piñatas at the top of the food chain: you lure in a Mousemallow to feed to a Syrupent, then feed the Syrupent to a Macaracoon and so on. This is further complicated by the ability to breed animals, which involves checking off another set of requirements to help get them in the mood. Smaller piñatas, it seems, serve as the perfect aphrodisiac. This can test your loyalties – say you want to breed the foxy Pretztails, but have grown attached to the two Bunnycombs who have settled in the garden. Naturally you get the latter to do what rabbits do best, and make another Bunnycomb – so you can feed that cute little baby straight to a Pretztail.

As you nudge forward through the game, waiting for the right animal to wander into your garden, tending to plants, and building homes for your favourites, the initially gentle pace begins to snowball. *Viva Piñata* introduces 'sour' piñatas, who drop sweets that can poison a resident; weeds that can spring up and choke your existing plants; masked Ruffians who vandalise and start fights. It's around this point that you begin to glimpse the game's hidden dark side.

Family-friendly games weren't the only thing Rare was known for. Titles such as *Killer Instinct*, *Goldeneye 007* and *Perfect* ▶



Dark brought a vital edge to Nintendo's catalogue. Conker, one of the cutesy animal characters created for *Diddy Kong Racing*, was revamped into a sweary, hard-drinking squirrel armed with Uzis and a chainsaw. By 2006, though, games had to work considerably harder to shock. Six months after the launch of *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, Rockstar changed the gaming landscape with the release of *Grand Theft Auto III*. Xbox consoles had made their name with the likes of *Halo*, *Splinter Cell* and – launched just days before *Viva Piñata* – *Gears Of War*. An attempt to return to Rare's more bloody roots with *Perfect Dark Zero* proved disappointing.

While it may not have been obvious on the surface, though, some of this spirit lived on in *Viva Piñata*. The violence is kept strictly PG – when a piñata is killed, they pop open and spill their sweets on the ground, accompanied by the sound of children cheering – but it's effective because the game has encouraged you to invest in these creatures. The early game incentivises naming your piñatas with mechanical reward, sneakily building attachment. After all, which are you going to care more about, 'Horstachio 1' or the one named after your childhood pet? As anyone who's watched Bambi or The Lion King will tell you, the death of loved animals isn't exactly out of the realms of children's entertainment, but Rare finds new opportunities to twist the knife. Those spilt sweets will get eaten by passing piñatas, meaning it's not unusual to catch a treasured Fudgehog snaffling up the innards of its former lover. The circle of life, lovingly rendered in all its gory glory.



Horstachio was picked as the star of the Viva Piñata TV show, but the species has no special status in the game

And then Dastardos floats into your garden. The game's equivalent of the Grim Reaper, Dastardos is genuinely sinister. He glides just off the ground, a rigid expression on his Picasso mask, towards any piñatas who have fallen sick. "Dastardos has invented a cheerful song to help him through the day and make piñatas calm while he 'fixes' them," reads the in-game description. By fixing, of course, it means bashing them open with a big stick. Suffice to say, Dastardos is not a welcome presence in your garden. But as the pace picks up, he's an increasingly common sight.

IT'S NOT HARD TO SEE WHY MICROSOFT SAW THE OPPORTUNITY FOR A KID'S TV FRANCHISE IN VIVA PIÑATA

Viva Piñata increases the tension through something that's either a trick smartly borrowed from survival-horror games or a brilliant accident: the tools it gives you are just a little imprecise. The game plays out in realtime, and its controls often make it feel like you're trying to complete a very delicate task with a very long pole.

This is an offshoot of the god-game genre, but one which casts you as a hapless god. Your shovel can be brought down like a lightning bolt from Zeus, but you lack that all-important omniscience – meaning you can only react to things once they've already started happening.



Your garden's menagerie starts out fairly domestic, but as you progress it broadens out to include more exotic species



PEOPLE ARE STRANGE

***Viva Piñata*'s animals might be its stars, but they're not the only occupants of its world. The game's human cast is its biggest misstep, with voice acting that steps too far into children's TV-presenter territory. They're also rather strange, all wearing masks that border on the grotesque. And none are stranger than gardening-enthusiast Seedos. A rather sad individual, Seedos wanders into your garden at night, offering free seeds if you'll just listen to his broken half-stories. "Seedos has a family, but they aren't as reliable as seeds," he informs you. He's not always a welcome presence, but resist the temptation to bash him with your shovel. Do this too many times and you'll break his teeth, triggering manic laughter and pushing Seedos over the edge into outright villainy.**



A decade after release, a bustling garden of piñatas remains a bright and beautiful sight. But it can also be a distraction, allowing threats to sneak in unnoticed

Turn your back for one second too long, and a wild piñata can sneak into your garden on the hunt. The game pings you with a notification when this happens, but if you don't act quickly, it'll all be over before you can intervene. When things start to go wrong, you can suddenly find yourself drowning in notifications, trying to pick through all the ones about plants drying out to get to the real trouble.

Two of your favourite piñatas are fighting, so you reach for the shovel and... Too late. One of them falls to the ground, sickly green. You notice a gate open in the pen separating predators from prey... Too late. A Cocoadile is gulping down your beloved Donald, the Quackberry you spent time and money dressing up. You spot a sour piñata, and look for the seeds it inevitably left behind... Too late. Red, ugly plants climb up, spitting fire and poisonous gas, choking and trapping whole piñata populations, meaning you miss the poisoned candies the sour also dropped on the other side of the garden.

When these disasters start to happen, you notice the game doesn't offer any quick save or load options. It's not exactly Ironman mode, but *Viva Piñata* is pushing you to stick with the consequences. The only way to sidestep the game's permanence is by shutting it down mid-session, praying for a convenient autosave.

That this option is so tempting is testament to *Viva Piñata*'s success, building just slowly enough that you get invested in this cutesy world, before baring its teeth. The game works because it blends the brightness of *Banjo-Kazooie* with the harder-edge Rare that showed in early games such as *Killer Instinct* and *Battletoads*.

Some species of piñata are predisposed towards conflict with certain others, but others are positively chummy



Unfortunately, when it came to finding an audience, this meant that *Viva Piñata* fell between two stools. The game did well enough to launch a handful of sequels and spin-off games, but sold a small fraction of what Rare's biggest hits had managed. After a couple more games the studio was folded more closely into Microsoft, working on avatars for Xbox Live and a string of Kinect games. It's only now, with *Sea Of Thieves*, that Rare is stepping back into the spotlight – and so in 2018, the developer once again finds itself at a crossroads, with a bold new game positioned as its big comeback. ■

A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Puzzle & Dragons

Developer/publisher GungHo Online Entertainment **Format** Android, iOS **Release** 2012

Rumours of the demise of *That Game **Edge** Won't Stop Going On About* were, it seems, a little premature. At the time of writing, the expected death of the European *Puzzle & Dragons* server is yet to come to pass, though it only seems a matter of time given the cessation of premium currency sales. In Japan, however, things are quite different. GungHo's dizzying puzzle-RPG may not be the force it once was in its home nation; once comfortably the top-grossing mobile game, it has since been surpassed by *Fate/Grand Order* and *Monster Strike*. Neither those nor the legion of so-called gacha games snapping at *PAD*'s heels would exist were it not for *PAD* itself. Now, with its star seemingly fading, we see how a company reacts when its biggest source of business is under threat.

When the game in question is one of the biggest free-to-play games in the world, the solution is twofold. First, make the game incredibly generous; second, make it increasingly absurd. In *PAD*'s entry in our Top 100 Videogames special edition in 2015, we enthused about a team composition that could burst for a total of seven million points of damage. In a Time Extend the following year, we pointed out that number was now in comfortable reach of a single team member. These days they can comfortably hit the game's damage cap – 2,147,483,647, the largest number it is possible to display in a 32-bit integer.

What, then, of *PAD*'s generosity? The game recently reached its sixth anniversary, which GungHo trailed by a full six months of events, each packed with giveaways of rare monsters and premium currency. February itself was as generous as the six preceding months put together, and while the game's birthday may now be behind us, GungHo has no intention of stopping now, with a March monthly questline giving away one of the most powerful monsters in the game.

The future, however, looks uncomfortable. Despite GungHo's best efforts, once a game has peaked, the only way is down. The developer is focusing more heavily on *Puzzle & Dragons Radar*, a standalone app that uses your phone's GPS to scan for items and nearby treasures that can be passed over to your main *PAD* account. Bolstered last year with a PvP mode, it has since been officially recognised as an eSport. The company is investing in new games, too, with *PAD* producer Daisuke Yamamoto now heading up the all-star team making card-battling game *Chrono Magia*. It may not quite be on life support yet, but when its makers are so clearly preparing for life without it, it's probably time for us to do likewise. ■

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